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"NOW, MY LILL, STRAIGHT TO HIM WHO AWAITS YOU!"

The Winged Messenger; or, Risking All For A Heart.

BY MRS. MARY REED CROWELL,
Author of "The Masked Bride," "Vials of Wrath," Etc., Etc.

CHAPTER I.

THROWING DOWN THE GAUNTLET.

THE brilliant winter afternoon was drawing near its sunset. All day the sun had shone brightly on the white, freshly-fallen snow, that lay in sloping piles in the streets, and now, as the flaming and ruby

tints of the coming eve lent their rich glow, all the landscape seemed glorified as by a divinely fair presence.

It seemed a time, a place, for sweet, restful thoughts; for innocent joyousness, and merry gayety; the occasional peals of girlish laughter, or the shouts of deeper voices, told, all along the pretty village streets, that merriment reigned somewhere, if not in all places.

And yet, while all Beechcrest was happy and gay, the fairest of them all, the belle of the little village, whom the girls all envied while they could not but love, and the sterner sex admired where they dared not adore, was walking the floor of her room, with flashing eyes and haughty, compressed lips; her proud little head thrown back in indignant contempt, her white fingers restlessly lacing themselves in and out.

Then, suddenly pausing by a little writing-desk, she drew from a

drawer paper and pen, and rapidly wrote a line or so:

"ARCH, dearest, please tell me what I must do. He has been here not ten minutes ago, and when I refused to see him, my mother bade me remain in my room, a prisoner, till I should consent to tell him I would marry him. Arch, what shall I do? You know I hate Ellis Dorrance even more than I fear him; you know I *never* will be false to you."

"I send this by Lili, our white-winged messenger, as usual. Arch, I await your advice."

"As ever, FLORENCE."

Then, inclosing the note in an envelope, and tying a ribbon securely, with many a tender caress she fastened it around the neck of a sweet-eyed bird, a snowy carrier dove, pure as Florence's own girlish heart.

"Now, my Lili, straight to him who awaits you!"

Then, raising the sash, she allowed the bird to go, on swift, graceful wings, homeward bound.

But the sparkle had not left her eyes, nor the flush her cheeks, when she resumed her walk to and fro.

"To be treated so—to be compelled—no, attempted to be coerced—in these days, into a marriage so distasteful as this proposed one! Marry Ellis Dorrance? Never, though I die in this room, a starved prisoner! Arch Chessom has my heart, and I feel he will find some way for me to escape."

She seated herself in a pretty little chair, cushioned with some dainty material that well set off her clear dark complexion, and large, dark eyes.

Florence Arbuthnot was called a pretty girl; and certainly she looked very beautiful that afternoon in her elegantly simple house-dress of dark green poplin, fitting so perfectly her graceful figure, and trailing off in stylish folds around her.

Her hair was very soft, and of a dark, bright brown, with a wave running through it; and her expert fingers could arrange it in a variety of styles that drove the other girls to envious desperation.

To-day she had curled it, and then drawn it back and fastened it with a large pearl and gold comb, allowing little tendrils of curls to escape wherever they chose.

A half-hour passed; then came a quick step along the hall, and then an authoritative knock on the door brought back the scarlet bloom that was fading from her face as she sat there, in the now gathering twilight, thinking of Mr. Chessom.

"It is I, Florence. I am coming in."

It was Mrs. Arbuthnot's voice.

"Very well. Only I see no need of announcing the fact, seeing as the door was locked on the outside."

There was a quiet scorn in her tones as the lady relocked the door on the inside, and then sat down in a dusky corner by the fire.

"I don't like to do this, Florence; I think you can dislike it no more than your father and I do. Only, Florence, so long as it is decided you are to marry Mr. Dorrance, and you are so obstinate—"

"I am obstinate, and I *never* will marry him! Why do you insist on what I declare is an impossibility?"

She burst impetuously forth, growing angry at the calm smile on the lady's face.

"Because I have heard young ladies talk so before, Florence, and have seen them marry their especial aversions after all, just as I intend you shall."

There was a horrible strength in the mild assertion that chilled the girl's heart, though she was not alarmed.

"Yes," went on Mrs. Arbuthnot, "I have arranged with Mr. Dorrance for the wedding—"

Florence sprang from her chair, her whole frame quivering in excitement and indignation.

"Mother! if, indeed, you are—are you my mother?"

She asked the question suddenly, almost sharply, as she gazed through the gloom on the lady's face.

But now the twilight had become too deep for her to see the white pallor that spread, as by magic, over Mrs. Arbuthnot's face, or to note the sick, terrified gleam of her gray eyes.

Then a low laugh—a little forced—issued from the thin, grayish white mouth.

"What an absurd question! I think it deserves no answer. Rest assured no one but a mother would have borne with you as I have done."

"Because," went on Florence, ignoring the latter clause, "I never can remember the time when you treated me as a loving, unselfish mother would. I've thought of it often and

often, and, as you said, thought how absurd was the idea. But like a revelation it has come to me this moment—you are *not* my mother!"

"Florence, I will not permit this talk!"

"There! is that motherlike? would you not laugh and kiss me, and think I was joking, if you were my mother? Would you try to sell me, body and soul, to a man I hate, if I were your child? Before God, I declare my solemn belief that I do not belong to you!"

Mrs. Arbuthnot had gained complete control of herself now, and, as she struck a match and lit the gas, she was the impersonation of wounded dignity.

"Florence, we will not discuss so ridiculous a question. I came up-stairs to tell you that Mr. Dorrance is in the parlor, and that your father and I demand you to go to him, like a dutiful daughter."

"I'll go to him, yes," flashed Florence; "and I'll read him such a lesson as he never heard before."

She turned disdainfully away from the lady; but Mrs. Arbuthnot followed her, and laid her finger on her arm.

"Remember what I have said, Florence Arbuthnot. You refuse Mr. Dorrance *at your peril!*"

Her voice was almost a hiss, as she whispered in the girl's ear, and Florence caught a momentary green gleam of the gray eyes, as she shook off the cold hand.

"I shall refuse him undoubtedly. I detest him now, if I never did before, and he shall know it."

Like an empress she swept down the stairs, and into the parlor, and stopped full under the blazing glare of the chandelier.

"Mr. Dorrance, what is it you want of me?"

Her cold, curt, yet perfectly polite tones, made it very awkward for his proposed love-making. But Ellis Dorrance was a man of the world, well versed in courteous usages; one whom little things were not apt to annoy.

He was certainly a very handsome man, at a first, sweeping glance, with his tall, elegant figure, attired in the most faultless style, the pale, haughtily-cut features, and the startlingly black hair, eyes, brows and beard. Any one would have pronounced him very fine-looking at first, and then, little by little, was revealed the keen, sinister light in his eyes, the cold, crafty expression of his face, and the unprincipled, licentious curve of his mustached mouth.

With a faultless bow, he rose from a chair he had been occupying during that interview above-stairs.

"Be seated, please, Miss Florence."

"Thank you—no. I have but five minutes to devote to you, and I can stand that short time." She waved away the camp-chair he had brought.

"But I fear, my dear Miss—"

"You need *fear* nothing, sir, as I fear nothing. Avoid preliminaries, and let me know what it is you wish."

Their eyes met in a steady glance—Florence's fierce and defiant; his tender and beseeching, and she felt a thrill of disgust tremble over her.

"I will tell you what I came to say—that I love you very truly, and beg to be honored by being accepted by you as your lover."

A contemptuous smile flitted over Florence's face. Then she grew stern and dark again.

"Is that all? because I can answer as readily as you have asked; although I doubt if I have taken so much trouble to prepare and learn it by rote."

She paused a second, and Dorrance took instant advantage of it.

"Your parents have given me their cordial approval; I hope I am not distasteful to you. What more can I ask than that you will love me?"

"You need ask nothing, Mr. Dorrance; we are both of us assuming a cordiality we neither feel. You know as well as I can tell you, that I care nothing for you, that I never will. You know my *parents*, as you term them, are determined to bring about this marriage. But, Mr. Dorrance, once and for all, I give you my answer in words, as you have had it for months in my conduct: I will not marry you."

She bowed, as if to end the matter then and there, but Ellis Dorrance caught her hand, almost rudely, as she turned to go.

"But I had not expected this, Florence! This is so cruel, so harsh of you, when you know I love you, yes, worship you so!"

A derisive little smile curled her red lips.

"I hardly think your heart is likely to break. But if it did, I could not change my mind. I dislike you exceedingly, and this pressing of a

distasteful suit is not likely to enhance my regard for you."

His brow grew ominously dark; and, although Florence did not look directly at him, she felt the hot glare of his eyes.

"Florence!" and then by the altered tone of his voice, she knew there was something coming; so she straightened her head, and strengthened her heart, resolved to fight to the very last.

"As you said, we need not play at cross-purposes. I was as well aware of the condition of your affections six months ago as I am this moment. I knew you loved a young man, whose pretty face has won what you suppose to be your love. I knew that you were engaged to Archer Chessom, and yet this knowledge did not, *will* not deter me from my plans."

He paused, possibly enaged by Florence's elaborately polite attention and sarcastic smile.

"Nor do I intend relinquishing what I have in view. I love you, Florence Arbuthnot, with a fervor your lover or yourself can never comprehend. I have your parents' consent to visit you, and make you my wife; more, I have their sworn promise that you shall be my wife, and I intend it shall so be! If you will be mine, well and good; I offer you a loyal love, a good home, and as happy a life as any one can give you. Otherwise, you may learn experimentally what you know now theoretically, that 'all's fair in love.'"

"Or war," please add, sir, to your precise programme of arrangements, for I can assure you there *will* be 'war' to the very knife if this disgusting farce goes on further. Mr. Dorrance, let me bid you good-night."

"Then you throw down the gauntlet?"

"I have nothing to do with you at all, sir."

"And you defy me—my power?"

She flashed a glance of supremest scorn at him, and Ellis Dorrance thought she never had been so peerlessly beautiful in all her life before.

"You talk of your *power* in these days; where were I to raise my voice, I could call a dozen men to my relief. Just bear in mind the year, 1870, the vicinity—twenty miles only from New York—and then you can, perhaps, comprehend how utterly silly such language sounds."

Without a further word, she walked quietly from the room and ascended the stairs to her own apartment.

Ellis Dorrance watched her a moment, then a smile, more terrible than a frown, lighted his face.

"How innocent she is, the darling! I wonder how she'd relish 'war to the knife?' From all appearances, that will be the only way!"

Then, his countenance growing gloomily stern, and his eyes lowering in their intense blackness, he muttered, as Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot entered the door.

"I'll accomplish this thing, or may I die in the attempt!"

And the trio sat down together.

CHAPTER II.

MOTHER AND SON.

CHESSOM'S Pride was the finest old country seat for many a mile either side of Beechcroft village.

A large stone mansion, with deep mulioned windows, of good old-fashioned style, a high flight of stone steps, that led to the grand circular entrance, a square, low tower, and ivy-grown walls all lent a delightfully picturesque aspect to the mansion, making it in reality what it was in name, Chessom's Pride.

For a dozen generations it had been the home-stand of the family, who loved it only second to their name, of which they were foolishly, inordinately and yet pardonably vain.

Foolishly vain, because, in their estimation, none of the human family were so great, so grand, so good as the Chessoms of Chessom's Pride; because they vaunted this fact in every action of their lives.

Pardonably proud, because really the Chessoms were a noble race; generous, benevolent, thoughtful of the welfare of others.

An exception to this last consideration was very rare in the family; yet, once in a while, there would be a Chessom who was like other people, selfish, prejudiced and heady.

Such a one, or rather such a pair, were the present Mrs. Chessom, a widow, and her only daughter, Cora.

The heir, the darling of mother and sister, was precisely opposite in every trait of character.

Archer Chessom was physically perfect; of rarely beautiful face, with his clear, fair, darkly-golden hair, that swept over his forehead in a graceful curve, his bright, merry, fathomless

eyes, of an indescribable violet shade, and heavy, tawny mustache, he was one whom no woman could see without instantly admiring, or know at all intimately, without loving.

Proud, without haughtiness, bold, without a vestige of presumption, Arch Chessom was the man to whom Florence Arbuthnot had given her young heart's whole affections; who in return was beloved by him with a strength and fervor that few persons are capable of.

Arch Chessom was in the elegant dining room that winter's afternoon, when Florence was writing to him from her room. Mrs. Chessom and Cora, each with some trifle of gay knitting, and attired in full dinner costume, were with him, awaiting summons to dinner.

"You knew Gussie was coming out from Beecherest for a week, didn't you, Arch?"

"I believe I heard some one mention it."

If Cora Chessom meant to create an enthusiasm on her brother's part she was mistaken, for he just glanced up from the afternoon paper he was reading.

"I meant to speak of it before, for I do want you to help entertain her. I know she enjoys your society very much."

Arch smiled behind his paper, and thought what a miserable diplomatist Cora was; also, how thoroughly he disliked Gussie Palliser.

"And I'm sure Arch returns the compliment; we all love Gussie very dearly."

Mrs. Chessom pronounced her words as though they were the fiat of some awful destiny.

"And she'd come over so much oftener if she knew Archer wanted her here."

Arch laughed outright as he threw down his paper.

"You ladies are meditating some attack on me, I judge by the skillful skirmishing, while I most cordially avow I prefer an out and out pitched battle."

Cora laughed, and glanced at her mother.

"The truth is, my son, we've been hoping so you would marry Gussie Palliser; she is so suitable every way; so stylish and aristocratic and handsome; just your style of beauty, too, Arch."

He made a low bow.

"Thanks, mother dear, but I much prefer dark young ladies."

A frown gathered on Cora Chessom's pretty face, and her brother knew what she was thinking of before the words left her lips.

"I suppose so; like the Arbuthnot girl, for instance."

"Exactly; only be so good as to remember her name is Florence, or Miss, Arbuthnot, whichever you prefer."

A darkly ominous frown gathered on his mother's brow, and Cora, thus reproved, flushed angrily.

"Indeed, I shall never call her by either name. The idea of *you*, a Chessom, to censure me because I will not affiliate with a nobody—"

"Cora!"

Arch's voice could contain that in its tones calculated to awe any one to whom he addressed himself; and his sister knew she had offended him by his voice.

"Perhaps I had best tell you now, that you may set at rest forever, all hopes of my marrying Miss Palliser. I made my choice months ago, and when I bring my wife to Chessom's Pride, Cora can call her Mrs. Chessom, or Florence, whichever she chooses."

Then, with a resolute air, as if the subject were dropped, he resumed his paper.

But his indignant mother was not to be thus summarily disposed of, and she rose to her feet in wrathful pride.

"It is a shame, a disgrace! and I regret that I live to see the day when my son, my only son, shall sully the proud name by taking in such a creature! Arch, what would your father say if he were alive to know this? and I, your mother, ask you *who* is she, *what* is she, that she should come here mistress of us all? But not of *me*! never of *me*! I will leave the home that has been mine these thirty years, and beg first! You must choose between us, Archer, between your own mother and this girl!"

Mrs. Chessom was thoroughly in earnest, and the young man thought, as he glanced from her flushed, angry face to the cold, impassive one of his sister, that the only path for him to pursue was that of kind firmness; and, if at all possible, reconcile them to the idea of his marriage with Florence Arbuthnot, with the mental reservation that it could make no possible difference to him if they did disapprove.

He was sole master of Chessom's Pride; and while he loved his mother, and was proud of

his handsome sister, Florence was more dear than both.

He thought of all this as Mrs. Chessom stood before him, her very dress quivering among its heavy silken folds with the partially revealed, partially pent-up excitement she experienced.

"Mother dear, I am very sorry this should have occurred: and yet I had intended to make known my purpose very shortly. You must be aware, surely, that a man of twenty-seven feels perfect liberty as to whom he shall marry; and while I hope to honor and respect every wish of yours, and gratify, to the best of my ability, Cora's desires, still, in an affair of this kind, I have chosen to be my own counselor."

"But to think we must be subject to her; second to a workingman's daughter! Arch, it will crush me to the dust!"

"I anticipate no such unfortunate catastrophe, for two reasons: First, Florence has no ambition to assume the reins of government at Chessom's Pride, for a time, at least, although, after a while I shall prefer that she should, and shall insist upon it."

Mother and daughter could not but be struck with his quiet, gentlemanly air, his firm, decisive tones; they could but feel the dignity of his manner as he thus boldly, affectionately defined his position.

"Besides, my dear mother, Florence is not the daughter of a workingman, as you suppose. Were she the child of the humblest chore-woman, and still Florence, with all her sweet, arch ways and winning grace, I should love her as well. Yet, to gratify you and Cora, I will tell you that the Arbuthnots are comfortably off; Florence has received as good an education as Cora, and in style, dress and deportment, is fully her equal."

A contemptuous smile curled Miss Chessom's lips at the disagreeable comparison; and Mrs. Chessom drew a long breath.

"It is only natural that you should talk so. Of course, if you are in love with her, you will admit no faults. Well, as I said before, I say again: choose between us."

Arch was vexed at the remark, and as he dashed his paper on the floor, his eyes glistened, and that look of stubborn haughtiness that was on his mother's brow, that seldom disfigured his own, proclaimed his resolve.

"We will allow the subject to rest. Cora, just ring for Hurst to bring in dinner."

It was not a cheerful meal; Mrs. Chessom sat rigidly upright in her gothic-backed chair, and silently ate a scanty morsel of food, while Cora assumed an attitude of indifference that was so unreal, it would have been ludicrous had Arch observed it.

As it was, he hastily swallowed a few mouthfuls of St. Julien soup; then, before the next course was brought, excused himself and left the room, crossing the hall to the library, his customary sitting apartment when at home.

It was a long, high-ceiled room, with several green satin draped windows, a green and white velvet carpeting on the floor; a pleasant, cheery place, where one would have loved to linger for hours among the hundreds of books that lined the walls; among the statues, bronzes and paintings.

At one of the side windows, just outside, on a sunny veranda, a gorgeously-gilded cage was swaying in the light breeze that had sprung up at sundown, and Arch went directly to this cage as he entered the room.

His countenance brightened joyously as he saw it was occupied.

"Lili, you have brought me a treasure!"

He smoothed down the pure white feathers on the beautiful bird's back, and Lili cooed and nestled as though she understood his commendation.

With caressing hands he untied the tiny billet, then lifted the cage inside, where the air was genial and the last rays of the delicious sun slanted athwart it.

As he read, his cheeks grew flushed; and he compressed his lips tightly, as if to hold back some bitterly sharp words that had leaped to his tongue's end.

Then, hastily drawing paper and pencil to his side, he dashed off an answer:

"My own darling, I am glad you have told me. I can help you; I *will* help you; and this is what you must do: Make whatever preparations you need, and leave your home in the most secret manner, lest discovery should thwart us and make you doubly unhappy. I will be at the corner of Prince and Church streets with the carriage, any hour you may name to-morrow! we will go direct to Dr. Baldwin's, your own pastor, be married and return to your house at Chessom's Pride. Remember, my conscientious little darling, I am proposing no runaway match; I am only going to place you beyond the

power of Ellis Dorrance's annoyance. You will consent, my dearest Florence? and send our faithful Lili back at once with your arrangements. Of course it can not be to-night, as it is now near to five o'clock, and Lili takes an hour or more for her return to Beecherest, by the hand of Esau, who will carry this note and the bird to you. Be courageous, my darling, and trust me ever to be your own

"ARCHIE."

Then he rung the bell, and delivered the sealed note and Lili, the faithful Cupid's messenger, whom Mr. Chessom had trained purposely to convey letters from Florence to himself, knowing the hopelessness of urging his suit personally at the Arbuthnots' house, and fearing lest the wickedness of Ellis Dorrance would waylay letters sent by ordinary methods of transmittal.

Thus was the beautiful carrier-dove employed, the emblem of peace and happiness, but used, alas, in these sad days, when over the water, fond hearts wait with hope deferred for the coming of the little winged messenger: dreading to learn the message under its wing, fearful lest some loved one has written for the last time, while, high up on seats of national power, the great ones of earth resort to the trusty feathered servant to convey important news to and from the doomed city, once the gayest of the gay—now, ah, pitifully shorn of gladness, and with a million deaths knocking at its gates! And within, while the carrier-dove soars aloft in the pure, free air, bearing its precious burden, there crouch the mother and the daughter, the children and the babes, weeping and fearing, wondering why the brightness has gone out from earth, the light from the sun.

And yet, in all unhappy Paris, hemmed in by pitiless besiegers, there was no truer a prisoner than Florence Arbuthnot, in her own house, under her own roof, that winter's night.

And to none of France's daughters did ever carrier-dove bring more welcome news than that to her, after the darkness had set in; when trusty Esau, cautiously tapping the window from the little balcony he was accustomed to use, handed her the precious letter and white-winged Lili.

CHAPTER III.

SHOW HIM OUT!

WHEN Florence Arbuthnot had left Mr. Ellis Dorrance standing so uncereemoniously in the parlor, after her positive refusal of him and his offers, the girl's parents had entered, having heard every word that passed, from an adjoining room.

It needed but a glance from either party to reveal the angry vexation that existed on both sides.

"She's the most obstinately imprudent girl I ever saw in all my life. She doesn't care *that* for your authority or my threats." Dorrance snapped his fingers lightly.

"But she must be made to care, Dorrance. I tell you you shall have her, in spite of the very Evil One himself."

A black frown was gathering on Mr. Arbuthnot's brows, and his wife sought to avert the coming storm.

"Girls are all alike; she will consent soon, I am confident. You must be patient, Mr. Dorrance."

"Patient! did you hear her unqualified refusal of me? and then tell me to be patient! I'd rather have a chance at young Chessom; it's he that's causing all this trouble."

"What need you care for young Chessom. I'd like to know? Don't I say you shall have her?"

"And don't I say you've nothing to say about it?"

The two men were fast verging on to a quarrel, when Mrs. Arbuthnot's soft, smooth voice came in.

"There is no use talking this way. If we are ourselves divided, how can we expect to accomplish our long-anticipated ends? Mr. Dorrance, you know as well as I the reason why Florence must marry you; the secret is yours as well as ours."

A hoarse laugh escaped Dorrance's lips.

"And if the young lady does not suspect part of the mystery, at least, I'm no judge."

A cold, gray shade gathered on Mrs. Arbuthnot's face, and she averted her eyes from her husband's, darting an appealing glance to Dorrance, that only brought a sneer to his lips.

"Suspect! she suspect? By heaven's, how should she? Woman, does she know a syllable through your intervention?"

Mr. Arbuthnot grasped his wife's arm roughly, and glared fiercely down in her terrified face.

"No, no!" she gasped. "I have never dared

to say a word; and when she told me her convictions, I laughed at her and did the very best I could to disarm her suspicions."

Her husband never let go his hold while she thus hurriedly explained.

"Then she has spoken! What did she say? Tell me truly, and remember the sword so long suspended may drop very soon, if there is treachery between you and I."

"It was but a word; she declared I never had seemed like her mother, and she believed we were not her parents."

A fierce, almost insane wrath gathered in Mr. Arbuthnot's eyes; then he tightened his hold of his wife's arm.

"It will be ill with you if she does not change her mind! Mark that!"

Then striding away he paced to and fro in restless agitation.

"I suppose I may as well go, as I always go, unsuccessful, and no nearer any results than when I began. By Jove, if it wasn't for the way I love her, and the way I hate those Chessoms, I'd give it up."

Dorrance threw himself moodily back in the chair, an ugly frown contracting his forehead.

But Mrs. Arbuthnot turned upon him like a tigress.

"Don't you give it up! Just go on, say a month longer, and I swear to you she shall be your wife."

A redly luminous light glowed in her eyes, and her husband glanced approvingly toward her.

"A month, is it? that is, granting she does not elope with young Chessom."

"She'll not do that. She can not leave her room."

Dorrance listened, then took up his hat.

"D'y'e know where I am going? As straight to Chessom's Pride as I can go."

"And tell young Archer for me that if he dare as much as look at Florence again, he'll rue the day."

Ellis Dorrance went out, and called a carriage to take him to Chessom's Pride.

It was just after Arch had dispatched the carrier-dove and letter to Florence that Mr. Dorrance's card was handed to him by the footman.

A hot flame rushed to his face as he read, then he grew calm and cold as he walked to the little reception-room to see this man to whom he owed so much dislike.

He had met him frequently before, so they were no strangers, although it was the first occasion of Dorrance's visit at Chessom's Pride.

Arch bowed slightly, and Dorrance rose to his feet as the host entered.

"Mr. Dorrance, I believe."

"Yes, I wish to have a short conversation with you, sir, if convenient."

It was plainly evident that it would not require many words from either to burst into flames the smoldering fire of mutual dislike between them; and while Dorrance was wondering how to begin to speak, Chessom was calculating whether his strength was equivalent to the task of collaring the man and kicking him down the steps.

"Perhaps you are not aware that the object of my call is of a very delicate nature; so much so, in fact, that I feel almost at a loss to tell you what I wish you to understand."

It might have been that he was warming with his subject, or the sight of Arch Chessom's haughty, repellent face vexed him; but certain it is that Dorrance's voice took on a different tone as he finished his sentence.

Mr. Chessom's lips parted in a derisive smile.

"Pray inform me, sir, on this important subject. My time is limited, and I beg you will be as explicit as possible."

The wrathful light rose to Dorrance's eyes that had chilled Florence Arbuthnot's heart.

"Then, in as few words as possible, since I desire to leave your presence quite as ardently as you wish me to do, I will ask you if you are aware that the attentions you are paying Miss Florence Arbuthnot are extremely odious to that young lady's parents, as well as to myself?"

If he had expected to work upon Arch Chessom's passions, he was mistaken, for there was not a quiver of the nostril, or a wink of the eye to indicate the insult he had pointed.

"To you, sir? And may I ask who or what you are to interfere between any lady and myself?"

His cool, scornful tone told upon the excitable Dorrance.

"I will tell you who and what I am. I am Florence Arbuthnot's future husband in spite of you, and I demand that you cease your atten-

tions to her; both on my authority and her father's I say it."

He had arisen from his chair in the heat of his wrath, and Chessom slowly rose, too, with an elaborate bow.

"Since you are to be the fortunate man, why come here and play this childish farce? John, show Mr. Dorrance the door, and do not bring me his card again."

He held open the door, with graceful, ironical courtesy, to permit Dorrance to pass through.

Just at that moment Esau passed in the hall, and not observing the presence of a guest, doffed his hat.

"I delivered the letter and the bird, sir, and Miss Florence said—"

"That is all right, Esau. Mr. Dorrance, good-evening."

He walked out of the library, leaving Ellis alone with the polite footman; the chance words of Esau ringing over and over in his astonished ears as he took his departure.

"A bird, and a letter! what could that letter contain that made it necessary that the Chessom carrier-dove, a well-known curiosity in the village, needs be sent to Florence Arbuthnot to convey an answer?"

Then, as he was driven rapidly homeward, a sudden idea seized him; he fairly sprung to his feet in delight at the thought; then, as the carriage whirled past the Arbuthnot house, and he saw a bright light shining in the windows of Florence's room, a fiendish smile spread over his sinister face, and he shook his head in villainous delight.

"Read your love-letter, pretty girl, and caress your white dove! We'll see to-morrow who holds the trump card!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAID OF LAKE VIEW.

STANDING at a distance of two miles from Chessom's Pride, and situated in the prettiest part of the village of Beechcrest, was a tiny cottage, *ornee*, whose elegant grounds, laid out in such delightful walks, arbors, dells and glens, where fountains played, and white statues gleamed amid the vivid green of summer foliage, was the admiration and pride of the Beechcrestians; while it possessed no less attractions in the wintry season, when the snow lay in vast, trackless sheets on the lawn, or piled up in fantastic heaps on summer-houses, fountain-beds and pedestals.

It was a gem of a place, and the house was no less perfect, with its marble-floored corridors, and beautifully furnished rooms, where all the elegant luxuries that money could buy, or taste devise, had found places.

About the estate, as well as the lovely, solitary mistress of it, had ever hung a mystery.

Who had bought Lakeview or who had built it, was not known to an inhabitant of Beechcrest; all the facts that were known at all, were patent to every one; and the only known facts were these:

That Mr. and Mrs. Edward Grayson, the gentleman and wife who lived at Lakeview in a secluded sort of way for a dozen or so of years, had died on a European tour; and that the present proprietress, beautiful Gussie Palliser, was heiress and mistress.

Who she was, or from whence she had come, no one knew; people only knew how beautiful and gay and fashionable she was; and Lawyer Alden pored for days over a pile of musty papers.

Then the fact went forth that Miss Gussie Palliser was heiress of Lakeview and all the accompanying colossal fortune.

It was no hard task for the young girl to gather about her the *elite* of Beechcrest. Lakeview was thoroughly remodeled and fashionably refurnished; Miss Palliser established her elegant little two-horse phaeton, and dressed her little colored groom in blue and silver livery; gave a large, splendid party—and then knew she was a success; second to none, even the Chessoms of Chessom's Pride, with whom she was at once on terms of cordial intimacy.

But with all her shrewdness, Gussie Palliser had made a grand mistake at the very outset of her career; and yet she could not help it, for the Fates had so ordained it.

She had fallen in love—hopelessly, irretrievably in love.

At first it had been a delightful flirtation; then, when the affair began to assume serious proportions, pretty, willful Gussie Palliser made up her mind that life, even with all the extraordinary inducements it offered her, would be a waste, unless she was blessed with the love of Ellis Dorrance. Possessed of a peculiar disposition, Gussie Palliser was a girl who would

not love easily, and as readily forget; with her it was necessarily an affection of a lifetime; an attachment formed never to be broken but by some fearfully severe blow.

Well, she had never heard of Florence Arbuthnot, so she gave herself up to the full enjoyment of her dream, undisturbed by visions of Dorrance's disloyalty, feeling herself blessed among women because he had told her how he loved her. He had sworn to her how precious she was to him; and then, feeling secure because their stations in life lay so far apart, had gone direct to Florence Arbuthnot and sued for her hand!

He loved—if such selfish and unprincipled men can experience the emotion—I say he loved sweet Florence far the best. To be sure, his vanity was deliciously flattered by the preference shown him by Gussie Palliser; and, Florence failing him, he was not adverse to marrying the other.

As far as the money was concerned, Florence was, on that score, less acceptable in her lack of riches, than Gussie with her snug fortune.

And he loved Florence a thousand-fold the best, he said, even as he walked up the circular path that led to Lakeview, whose dozens of lighted windows gave evidence of Gussie's own bright presence. He went to her with lies on his lips, while she wore a ring he had given her; he kissed her for a welcome, wondering what she would say if she knew; and then like a revelation it flashed across him that he had been a consummate fool to have gone to Chessom's Pride as he did, avowing his interest in Florence Arbuthnot, and Gussie going there so soon, when she surely would learn all. But he consoled himself with the thought that all might be decided before Gussie went to Chessom's Pride. If his plans worked, as he hoped they would work, Florence would be his own before Arch Chessom could tell Gussie of his perfidy.

And so intent were his thoughts, that more than once Gussie tapped his cheek with her fan, and offered a penny for his meditations.

CHAPTER V.

THE BEGINNING OF WRATH.

GUSSIE PALLISER never looked more regally than she did that night; and Mr. Dorrance, as he noted the short, boyish curls of sunny brown hair that clustered around her shapely head, and saw the dusky splendor of her black eyes as they fairly scintillated with merriment, wondered if, beneath that gay, joyous exterior, was a heart whose vengeance he would dread to encounter when he proved false to her; and then he wished he had never seen her, or else had never known Florence Arbuthnot.

He bade her adieu early, and at the gate held a hurried consultation with a rusty-looking man awaiting him.

"Well, Palmer, did she get the letter? Did you see the man leave it?"

"With my own eyes; and if you want the answer to it, the sooner you are on the grounds the better."

"Then you hasten back, and if I am not there in time, attend to it yourself."

Dorrance sauntered slowly along, not desiring to attract even chance attention by undue haste in leaving the grounds of Lakeview; so he lighted a cigar, and walked leisurely along, all unconscious of the presence of Gussie Palliser, as she followed him, rapidly walking to keep pace with his longer strides.

It had happened curiously, and yet the finger of Fate could be plainly discerned.

After Ellis Dorrance had bade her good-night and had got as far as the fountain, Gussie suddenly remembered a message she had particularly desired to tell him.

Snatching a shawl from the hat-rack in the corridor, she had flown after him; there, just where a large evergreen tree had interposed between them, she had heard the mysterious salutations exchanged between Dorrance and the stranger.

What was more natural than that her love and jealousy should be outraged and inflamed when she heard her betrothed husband discussing the subject of another lady's receiving a letter from him, and he awaiting the answer?

Gussie Palliser was a person of strong passions; one who could love as few women do, and hate, despise, as well.

At first, as she heard the words that struck a sickening chill to her heart, she had experienced a pang of agony, because she loved Ellis Dorrance so well, and the thought of losing him was death to her.

Then, as his cool, cautious tones continued, she wondered *who* it was that had won him from her.

So, when Dorrance walked on, her first impulse was to stop him, and demand what she knew was her just right to know. But a second's thought told her to find out for herself, and so she walked noiselessly on, twenty yards behind him, with wild fires surging in her veins.

For a moment, as she gazed after his tall, handsome figure, she verily believed she wanted to kill him for his falseness; a keen desire to punish him to the fullest extent of her power—and her dark, clouded face wore a strange smile as she thought how little he, or any one, knew her power, the power a passionate, reckless, jealous temper gives into its possessor's hands.

It was a long walk from Lakeview to the end of the village where Florence Arbuthnot lived; and the snow was cold under her feet.

But Gussie kept on, never regarding the time or the distance—only wondering how Ellis Dorrance could be so treacherous; he, whom she had exalted to a god among men; and compressing her red lips as she thought how dearly he should suffer if he had dared trifle with her.

At the corner Dorrance quickened his steps; and then, when he had reached the sidewalk directly opposite the residence of the Arbuthnots, he paused and steadily regarded the light windows of Florence's room.

The moon was going down, but it was light; perhaps on account of the snow; so that Gussie, from her post of jealous observation—a tree-box, just around the corner, where she might have stood in the broad sunlight and never have been observed—could watch every play of Dorrance's features, as he gazed at the gleaming windows. Directly the gas was turned off; and then Gussie saw a young girl come to the window, raise the sash and look out. Dorrance was earnestly watching her, a half-audible exclamation on his lips; and Gussie, her heart throbbing wildly, made up her mind that this fair-faced girl was the one who had robbed her of all she held dear.

With eyes flashing like those of an enraged leopardess, she suddenly stepped directly before Dorrance.

An oath sprung to his lips; less from fear than surprise to see her, face to face, her white trailing velvet dress lying whiter than the snow beneath it.

Her flaming eyes seemed almost as luridly red as the shawl she had flung around her; and her face was pale as the ghostly moonlight.

"Well, Ellis Dorrance?"

Her commonplace words cut him like a sword, so full were they of stinging wrath.

"Gussie, you in your slippers, and bonnetless, so far from home? Why—"

"Don't be fretting about me; don't assume what you do not feel. I ask you what does this all mean?"

She raised her hand—and Ellis saw the flash of the diamond ring he had sworn was his troth-plight to her—toward Florence Arbuthnot's windows. For a moment Dorrance stood busily searching for a plausible excuse; then, before he could frame a sentence, Gussie spoke:

"Why need I desire you to explain? It is enough that I am outraged, insulted by the affair; that you are a rogue, a villain! Ellis Dorrance, what shall I do to you?"

Her passionate anger aroused his own unangelic temper; he saw the game was up; the time had come of its own accord when Gussie must learn his perfidy; he would battle with an adverse fate no longer.

"Gussie Palliser, you count without your host when you dare threaten me. Remember a man has a right to love whom he chooses; and such fiery women as you do not often keep a man's heart after they have won it."

"I have kept your heart till *she* won it; but now, if a free gift I'd not accept it. Ellis Dorrance, I believe you are one of Satan's own—go your way; when you least expect it, you may regret the treachery you have shown me."

She turned away from him, and retraced her long, weary, chilling walk to her elegant home, while Dorrance, with a half-curse that she had detained him so long, hastened after Palmer.

The two watched from a distance until Florence closed the sash again, then, while Palmer went to his home, Ellis walked over to the hotel opposite the Arbuthnots' residence.

He secured a front room, and there he resolved to await the going forth of the carrier-dove.

Early next morning, Palmer came, according to previous agreement; then he set forth on a walk toward Chessom's Lodge, where, at a convenient spot he was to capture the little messenger.

There was not long to wait. The sun had just arisen, when from his window, peering through

the curtains, Ellis saw Florence send the dove forth, with a little folded billet around its neck.

His face denoted the evil gladness of his heart as he leisurely made exit from the side entrance and walked along to his own rooms, where he was to await Palmer.

An hour later Palmer returned, the dove safe in an unsuspecting basket he carried, and Florence's daintily-worded note still attached to its neck.

"ARCH, dearest, I consent to your proposals. Let it be to-morrow evening, between nine and ten, when I will leave my room by means of some strategy, even if I have to consent to promise myself to that despicable wretch."

Dorrance felt a glow of wrath flush his dark cheeks as he read.

"Now, Palmer, you attend to the errands I spoke of. Go to Isabel first, remember; then return to Norman street."

The man Palmer obeyed; a look of imperturbable stoniness on his heavy, stolid face; then after he was out of sight of Dorrance he laughed coarsely.

"I'm getting well paid for this job, but I reckon the boss don't suspect what's at the bottom of all my devotion. Policy, my gay Mr. Dorrance—policy's the word; for Jim Palmer don't work as hard as this for anybody but himself."

He walked along, a self-satisfied grin on his ugly lips as he glanced up at the darkened windows of Florence's room.

"My pretty little lady, it's lucky you can sleep to-night; for, if I am a judge, you'll be broke of your rest to-morrow night, on two accounts, seeing that I know the contents of your love-letter as well as Dorrance does."

CHAPTER VI.

THE CAGED BIRD.

THE next day was one of peculiar excitement to Florence Arbuthnot. She had sent her note of acceptance to Arch Chessom, never of course doubting but that he had received it; then, after a restless night, she awoke, resolutely determined to break the bonds that were fettering her.

Florence's childhood had not been made up of those delightfully sacred confidences between herself and mother; Mrs. Arbuthnot, though proud of the girl's beauty and style, had not satisfied the young, craving heart with tender demonstrations of affection, and many were the times Florence had cried herself to sleep in her younger days that she had no one to kiss her good-night, or tuck her up in her crib.

Latterly, when she had learned to depend on other resources for her happiness, she had very naturally grown alienated from her parents in heart, if not in manner.

Often she had seriously wondered *why* her life was so barren of the sweet tenderness she saw in other families; then, little by little, in a matter-of-fact way, she had accustomed herself to think she was not the child of Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot.

Whose, then, was she?

Perhaps another person would have imagined most romantic improbabilities, but Florence supposed she was a charity child, very likely; and while she gave the Arbuthnots grateful thanks for their benevolence, she inwardly wished she had been less favored in a worldly point of view, and not so starved in her heart.

But, all in all, mother, father, lover, was Arch Chessom to her; whom the Arbuthnots seemed to hate with a most venomous hatred, while, with unseemly determination, they forced upon her the attentions of Ellis Dorrance: which very assiduity, against her oft expressed wishes, was the latest, strongest proof to her that they were not her own parents, who would care for her happiness above all things.

So it had come to happen that there were few feelings of compunction or regret in Florence's heart that day, as she made her preparations for the evening.

She had her breakfast brought to her room; and then, by the maid, sent word to Mrs. Arbuthnot she would be down to lunch, according to the arrangement of the previous day, which meant she was ready to comply with her demand to give Mr. Dorrance a satisfactory answer.

With beaming face, Mrs. Arbuthnot hastened to the room.

"I knew you would think better of it, Florence. Just remember his money, and the elegant mansion he is building on Park Walk. And he is so handsome, too, my dear!"

Florence had made up her mind to listen to no eulogies on the gentleman's behalf, and she told the lady so.

"I don't want to hear a word about him, if you please. I will see him at ten this evening; not sooner."

Mrs. Arbuthnot arched her brows in lady-like amazement.

"Ten o'clock! isn't that very late?"

"Then or not at all, whichever you prefer," returned Florence, stiffly.

To which the lady assented, only too gladly, through fear of the alternative.

"Let it be ten then, in the library. Your father and I will be home till nine or thereabouts, and then we've arranged to stay all night with Mrs. Orman's boy that's ill with the scarlet fever. I would have been grieved to have left you in your own room, Florence; as it is, I am perfectly content that Ellis Dorrance shall help you to pass an hour or two away. Ann will be in the kitchen you know."

Florence's heart throbbed gladly. The house to be deserted by her parents, and she left to go out as she chose! She knew Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot would remain until they knew that Dorrance had come.

Mrs. Arbuthnot left the room, to write a summons to Dorrance to come at ten, as Florence had relented, and would see him.

At his room, where he was lodging while the house in Park Walk was being erected, Dorrance's letter was left by the village carrier.

He came in, just toward noon, after a round of visits, to find the letter; but not before Jim Palmer had acquainted himself with the contents.

Dorrance smiled, and tossed Mrs. Arbuthnot's note in the grate.

It was nearing the hour of eight o'clock, and Florence, from her room up-stairs, heard Ellis Dorrance's voice in the parlor.

"I came early on a business call, Mr. Arbuthnot, and will retire in a half-hour, to return at ten, to see Miss Florence—"

Then the door closed, and Florence, half vexed that he should be under the same roof, half exultant as she thought how she would out-triumphed him, went on with her dressing.

She was very pretty with her pink-flushed cheeks, and red, arching lips; very lovable with the tender love-glow in her bright eyes as she adjusted her dress before the toilet-glass, and thought it was her wedding-dress.

To be sure it was all very different from the dreams she had conjured up in earlier days, such dreams as all young girls enjoy, visions of a trailing sheeny silken dress, with rich, creamy lace gleaming mistily over it; the white, flowing veil bound by the inevitable orange blooms; the white gloves, etc. And yet arrayed in the customary bridal attire, Florence would have failed to look lovelier than she did in a silver gray Irish poplin, trimmed with crescent folds of darker satin. Her hair was flowing over her shoulders and a narrow band of cherry velvet held it off her face.

Lace cuffs and a collar, her watch and chain completed her elegant attire, and then she sat down and waited for Ellis Dorrance to go away.

It was only a very few minutes before she heard his clear ringing voice at the parlor door.

"Don't trouble yourself to come to the front door, it's bitterly cold, Mrs. Arbuthnot. I think I know the way, I'll be back by ten. Good-night."

He went out alone, Florence knew by the footsteps on the carpet. Then the front door closed with a quick jerk.

She drew a breath of relief. "I can scarcely breathe when that man is in the house!" She glanced impatiently at her watch that announced the time to be half past eight, and then Mrs. Arbuthnot came in her room, bonneted, cloaked and furred.

"Walter Orman is worse and we must not lose a moment. Florence," and she stepped closely to the young girl's chair, speaking in a low, intense voice, "Ellis Dorrance will be here at ten, possibly earlier. I trust you to treat him the same as if I were here. Ann will take care to report, remember."

A flush of anger reddened Florence's face.

"I do not need a servant to spy me. When I see Mr. Dorrance this evening, I think I shall satisfy both you and him."

The lady failed to notice the accented "when," and the covert sneer in Florence's tone escaped her.

Yet her eyes shone with a steely gray glance as she bade "good-night."

"I shall look for the ring on your finger in the morning, when I return."

"You shall see the ring when you return."

And a glad little flutter was in Florence's

heart as she thought *whose* ring Mrs. Arbuthnot would see.

But that lady marched away, wondering whether Dorrance had selected a *solitaire* or a *cluster*.

The house was deathly still after Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot had gone; broken at intervals by the jolly melody of Irish Ann and her beau in the kitchen as they sung their old Erin songs, or laughed at their own wit.

It was arriving near half-past nine, and in a fever of impatience, Florence began her final preparations. Her *sacque*, furs and dainty white felt jockey were quickly donned, just as the sound of carriage-wheels went flying past. She ran to the windows, but too late to recognize what she knew was the Chessom coach. She drew on her kids, and then sat down for a second before the grate to warm her feet. A feeling of strange, restful peace came over her as she realized how near the end was of all her troubles; a sweet, almost solemn light came floating into her eyes, and a smile was hovering on her pretty lips at her own thoughts.

Then, she arose and turned to the door to go out, down away from persecution to love and happiness forevermore.

Ellis Dorrance, smiling in malignant triumph, was standing just inside, with the door shut and locked, and the key in his hand.

A low, bitter cry came from her lips; a pallid agony swept the light and joy off her face. She involuntarily recoiled as her affrighted eyes rested upon him; then hot indignation quickly chased every other emotion before it.

"What do you mean, sir? are you aware this is my room?" Dorrance laughed lightly.

"Perfectly well. Are you aware I am an invited guest?"

"Not to this apartment. If you please we will adjourn to the parlor."

She stepped to the door, but he intercepted her.

"Thank you, no. Besides you can not get through, for the door is locked. See!" He swung the key lightly before her.

A little shiver of fear ran through her frame.

"It is very like you; all rascals and villains do the same! But in my home, I presume I am mistress; either unlock that door or permit me to. Otherwise I shall sound an alarm from the window."

Her face was pale now, and she saw the fiendish smile on Dorrance's face that always sickened her so, as he stepped closely to her.

"Do not attempt to make a disturbance, or—" and he drew the gold-mounted pistol from his vest pocket.

"Florence, I am in earnest. I am a desperate man, as you will learn. Now, Florence Arbuthnot, I came here to-night because you are all ready to meet Archer Chessom on the corner of Church street; you intend to be married at your own pastor's. But—"

He paused to enjoy the blank amazement on her face. How had he learned it?

"But, Florence, I have said I loved you; I have sworn an oath to make you mine; *mine*, hark you, by fair means or foul. I have offered you the fair, and now I shall make you accept the alternative."

His flashing eyes were burning into her face; his words came slowly, forcibly, sternly; the elegant little weapon he held with awful grace in his hand.

And Florence, in a whirl of contending emotions, terrified, angered, wonder-stricken, stood there face to face, hardly daring to breathe.

What should she do? Where was Archer, that he was not there to help her? Would Ellis Dorrance really shoot her if she screamed?

Then, while she was striving to decide what plans to pursue, he stepped suddenly forward, so near her she felt the flame of his breath on her cheek; she saw in a single second of horror, that he took from a small box a sponge; she smelled the chloroform, she knew it would render her insensible and she threw out her hands to fight him off. It touched her lips; she felt the sickening sensation that pervades total insensibility, and then—

Poor Florence!

Ellis Dorrance was holding her in his arms, all unconscious, so beautiful, so fair, and his passionate eyes devoured her face in its perfect contour, the shapely form, the dainty hands, and high arched foot, in the small buttoned foot.

CHAPTER VII.

A WOMAN'S VENGEANCE.

WITH all his bad traits of character, no other could have been more gentle than Ellis

Dorrance was, as he placed the unconscious form of Florence in the large easy rocking-chair, and drew a hassock for her feet to rest upon. Then he opened her writing-desk and left thereon a note he took from his pocket.

"I have gone with Arch Chessom. Escape was the only alternative left me."

It was a perfect *fac-simile* of Florence's chirography, that had taken him hours to accomplish that day, with the intercepted letter to Chessom lying before him. To the note was subscribed her name and Arch Chessom's, written in a large, bold hand, that the keen-headed, cunning-handed plotter had practiced on as well; his copy, a blue silken ribbon, he had taken from the carrier-dove's neck; that bore the name of the owner in his own hand-writing, written in a golden bronze, indelible fluid.

This note Dorrance left on the desk where it would be observed the moment one entered the room.

Then he took Florence, and drew her veil over her face; carried her gently, silently down the stairs; at the door, fearful lest the cool night air might revive her, he placed the sponge closely to her mouth, while, with but one or two steps he lifted her into the carriage that Palmer had driven to the door—the carriage Florence had heard while she was dressing. He lifted her gently in, and then followed.

"Now, Palmer, my good fellow, to the Haunted House as fast as the horses can carry you."

Palmer touched up the horses, that had been impatiently pawing the crumbling snow-heaps; down through the village streets they sped along, then out on the country road, past Chessom's *Pride*, where Arch sat in the lighted library, wondering why Florence had been so tardy in answering his letter: and giving himself as a reason that she knew best when to write him.

He heard the rattle of the carriage as it dashed by, and he glanced carelessly out at it, then resumed his reading. If he had but known! Ah! if we all but knew sometimes of the invisible danger or sorrows so near, yet so far!

Ellis Dorrance's dark face lighted with sardonic pride as he peered out at the elegant mansion, and faintly discerned the form of Arch by the center-table, where the drop gas was burning.

Jim Palmer's sinister face wore a smile, too, as he sneered to himself:

"I hate them both! I wonder which the worst! And as I hate *them*, so do I love *her*. Jim Palmer, body-servant to Mr. Ellis Dorrance, in love with Florence Arbuthnot, heiress of— There, that secret shall not leave my lips, even to the winds."

He lashed the horses into a still madder gallop, as if the wild speed cooled his heated brain.

"Yes, I know the secret! and I'll use it too! But I'd love her none the less were she a milk-maid. I wonder who'll win this race? that blackguard inside this carriage, or dandified young Chessom, back yonder? Or *Jim Palmer*?"

His reverie was broken by Dorrance's voice: "As quick as you can, Palmer; for I fear the effects of the drug are wearing off."

"I've only a quarter mile, sir; it's all right."

Up a dreary, stony road, where the snow had drifted off, the carriage was dragged through a bleak lawn, and to the door of an immensely large, dilapidated house.

With the same jealous care, Dorrance lifted Florence from the pillowed seat, and supported her slight figure to the inner hall.

"Wait a moment. Palmer, come to the fire, and warm yourself. I'll go back with you."

Then he touched a bell that sat on the table.

A repulsive-faced black woman answered the summons.

"Bid your mistress come hither. At once, tell her."

It was hardly a second, when the door opened and a woman entered and came up to Dorrance: her bright, fiercely-handsome eyes steadily regarding Florence.

"Isabel, this is she. Will you attend to her as we arranged, at once?"

The woman was still intensely regarding Florence, whose faint, fluttering breath was coming in little gasping sobs; then, after a searching glance at Palmer, who was sipping hot rum beside the blazing fire, stolidly indifferent, apparently, to whatever passed between the two, she raised her eyes to Dorrance's face.

"Tell me truly, Ellis, before I touch her: is the story you told me true, that she is an heiress you want to get rid of for a friend? or— and here the low, clear, ringing voice took in a defiant intonation that fairly challenged him

for the answer—"or, is it *another* one whom you think you love? Remember, Ellis, though I've sworn to serve you, and stand by you, I can not brook this."

She laid her nervous, brunette hand on his sleeve; he met her glance bravely, while a reassuring smile broke over his handsome, wicked face.

"I told you the truth, Isabel. This girl must be kept hidden, for a while at least, as I explained last night. She is nothing to me, nor ever can be. How could she be, when my peerless Isabel lives?"

How tenderly he caressed her; how enchantingly her dark face lighted up under his smile!

"But, Isabel, I fancy she will tell you strange things; you will not believe them, I know, because I deny them beforehand. Besides, I am sure the *to* and I administered has turned her brain somewhat. See to her, Isabel, and I will return to-morrow at the same hour."

Then, just as Florence opened her eyes in a frightened, dazed sort of way, and Palmer set down his rum-glass, Ellis Dorrance clasped Isabel about the waist, and kissed her.

Palmer chuckled, and Florence gave a little pitiful cry, as the door closed on the men.

Isabel reached out her hand, in a winning, tender way.

"What is it? You are not afraid of me?"

"No, but of him! Where am I? where has he brought me? Oh, Arch! Arch! will no one come to me? Won't you please let me go home?"

She grasped Isabel's two hands with her own daintily-kidded ones; her eyes, wild and wide-opened, pleading more forcibly than her lips.

"Why should you desire to go home, Miss Ida—"

"Ida! My name is not Ida! it is Florence—Florence Arbuthnot!"

Isabel smiled indulgently.

"I fear you are mistaken, my dear; Mr. Dorrance distinctly told me you were a Miss Ida Glenville."

Florence felt the net tightening around her; a horrible apprehension of danger came sweeping over her.

"It is false—false as his own black soul! Indeed, on my solemnest, sacredest word, I am Florence Arbuthnot; I was to marry Mr. Chessom this very night; and Ellis Dorrance, the vile monster, came to my bedroom, and swore I should be his. Then—yes, I have been under the influence of some spell, I know—I awoke to find myself here."

She gazed around her with pitiful, saddened gaze.

"Well, for the present, you are safe and well. Let me show you your room; it is nearly eleven."

"I do not wish to retire. I will remain here."

"No. Mary!" called Isabel, just raising her voice. "Assist Miss Ida to her room."

There was a tone of stern, decisive resolve in that smooth, ladylike order: and Florence felt how utterly helpless she was. The negress respectfully opened the door, and Isabel wished her a good-night.

There was no choice left; and with heavy step, and aching heart, she trod the echoing halls, guiltless of covering; the creaking, trembling stairs, up flight after flight, till it seemed she was mounting the clouds.

Mary stopped before a door that she unlocked, and then preceded her in.

"It ain't as nice as it might be, Miss Idy—"

But Florence sunk on her knees, the tears streaming from her eyes, as she clutched the gown of the ugly woman.

"Oh, don't call me that; it's not my name—please believe me! Let me go out, and see what I'll give you!"

She piled her rings, her watch and chain, her bracelets and portemonnaie, in Mary's hands, in a fever of eagerness.

"There! there! now show me the way downstairs! Come, before that Dorrance finds me again!"

She caught the negress by the arm, to drag her to the door.

Then, seeing her hesitate, and concluding the temptation was not strong enough, Florence snatched off her elegant furs.

"Take these too, if you will! and I'll exchange dresses with you. Take all I've got, only let me get away!"

Just then the dark, brilliant face of the Italiane looked over Mary's shoulder.

"Carry Miss Glenville's trinkets to my room, Mary."

Then, when Florence had turned away in bit-

her disappointment, Isabel went up to her, and laid her little hand on her shoulder.

"Miss Ida, you may as well be content to remain where you are. Here Mr. Dorrance brought you, for reasons best known to himself, and here you will remain until he sees fit to remove you."

Then she, too, followed Mary, and poor Florence heard the key grate as it turned in the rusty lock.

"Merciful Heaven! what shall I do?"

Then, as thought crowded on thought, her strength gave way again, and she slid softly down on the carpeted floor, in a deep fainting condition.

Down the four-flights of stairs, in the large, gloomy, well-warmed but dimly-lighted dining-room, Isabel Lefevre sat beside the fire, her hands idly crossed on her knees, her black eyes gazing dreamily in the fire. Around her handsome, full-cut lips a peculiar expression was creeping; one of thoughtfulness mingled with distrust, jealousy and uncertainty.

Her face seldom proved an index of the thoughts within, but to-night, when she knew that no human eye was on her, she suffered full play to the boldly handsome, expressive features; and her tiny brown hands folded and unfolded as she sat there.

"Am I to believe him, or not? Does he care for her? I would murder her in her sleep if I thought he did!"

Then the eyes flashed and flamed like those of Gussie Palliser.

A rap at the door; a loud, peremptory summons startled her; and Mary, napping over the kitchen fire, sprung to her feet in sudden alarm, for a knock at the door of the Haunted House was an occurrence as rare as snow in May. And at that hour, too!

Isabel bade Mary answer; *they* had no cause for fear, and so the negress opened the door.

A clear, high, girlish voice it was, who inquired for the mistress of the house.

Mary stood dumbfounded, but the midnight caller, whose horses stood impatiently waiting at the gate, walked past her into the room, where sat Isabel, sternly indignant.

"I beg a thousand pardons for this untimely intrusion, but you will overlook it when you learn the cause. I am Miss Palliser; Gussie, if you choose."

She smiled frankly, and extended her hand; then a rigid frown, dark as the midnight shadows, chased it away.

"I saw Ellis Dorrance bring her here; I followed them from the very door; I have watched him ever since I discovered his perfidy to me, and I know he and his pretty Florence Arbuthnot left her home together. Where is she?"

Isabel Lefevre stood like a statue, her hands clenched in a silent desperateness.

"What has Ellis Dorrance to do with you?"

A shudder crept over Gussie's frame.

"He never will be more to me again! I was his betrothed wife a week ago."

"WHAT?"

Isabel grasped her arm in a sudden impulse of wrath.

"What do you tell me? *you* engaged to marry Ellis Dorrance; this girl, they called her Ida, Ida Glenville, one of his loves—what then am I?"

She raised her voice to a pitch almost of frenzy; and Gussie's face saddened as she gazed at the storm of passion on the beautiful dark face.

"Are you a victim of his treachery, too? Then let us be friends."

But Isabel never moved a finger; she stood gazing into Gussie's pitying face.

"You do not love him as I do, or you'd never bear it so indifferently," she said, after a silence.

"You forget it is two days since I learned his falsity."

"Two days!" she repeated, contemptuously, "as if two ages can ever lessen this blow to me. False! Ellis Dorrance false to me, ME!"

She paced to and fro, her breath coming in quick jerks; then she poured out a wine-glass of strong rum, and drank it.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Palliser; the only effect will be to strengthen my nerves."

For a few moments she walked slowly to and fro; then paused directly before Gussie.

"Miss Palliser, I have decided to punish this man for the wrongs he has done. I hate him now more than I loved him an hour ago. More than that, I hate that girl of his up-stairs."

"So do I: and that is why I came here. Not that I dreamed of *your* existence, but because I hoped to see *her*, and tell her all I am burning to do."

"And I am this moment started on my track of vengeance. I shall strike him first through her, because he loves her."

She shivered as she said it.

"I am with you; tell me what I can do, and I will do it. I have money, and you may need it."

"All I ask at present is perfect cautiousness and secrecy. When I need you, I will send for you."

"At Lakeview, in Beechcrest."

With no further adieu, this strange interview ended, and the strange women parted; Gussie to return triumphantly home, Isabel Lefevre to seek the high nest where Florence Arbuthnot was confined.

CHAPTER VIII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

FLORENCE had not moved since she had fallen in the fainting swoon; and Isabel Lefevre, as she stooped over the unconscious girl, could not but admire the air of queenly grace about her, as, divested of all the elegant trifles that so enhance a woman's beauty, she lay there, pale, fair as some Parian statuette.

"And he loves her! Ellis, my own Ellis, loves this girl! Ah! my fingers burn to destroy the life he loves so! To think these lips have received his kisses, and given them in return! these eyes glanced into his love-lit ones—girl! girl! I could murder you where you lay!"

She laid her quivering fingers on Florence's white throat, then withdrew them as though the touch poisoned her.

"And you came here with a lie on your false lips—you learned your lesson well from so skillful a master—you came, thinking to blind me by your consummate acting; but the veil of deception has been rent in twain; the mask has fallen from a face I never would have believed was so black; and in the fall yours has been displayed. You love him, you know you do; and you can't help it; but how I hate you for it!"

She lifted the long, shining hair, half-jealously, half-savagely.

"Ah! to spoil your beauty, to rob him of you—there! what demon suggested the thought?"

Her face suddenly lighted up; she flew down the stairs with flushing cheeks and starry eyes.

"I have it! I have it! Now, Ellis Dorrance, you shall feel the weight of my hand."

Swiftly and silently she returned; locked the door after her, and sat down on the floor beside Florence.

First she cautiously applied a sponge well saturated with ether to Florence's face.

"She may revive otherwise. Now, an hour will effect wondrous changes."

Deftly her fingers unrobed the unconscious form; then, from a bottle, she applied a dark stain to Florence's skin; transforming her from a lily white to a bright dark-brown.

Instead of replacing her own clothes, Isabel clad her in a shabby cotton suit of underwear, and a flimsy morning calico dress.

The finger-nails were dyed and cut very closely; her brows and lashes stained to a jetty black; and the glorious hair, that Archer Chessom so loved, was cut short to her head, colored inky-black, and curled, by some liquid preparation, into tight kinks.

Still she lay, like a broken reed, all unconscious of the fatality in store for her, while the jealous woman gloated over her double revenge; on poor innocent Florence, for loving Ellis Dorrance; on Dorrance, for loving Florence; for Isabel had never, even in thought, admitted the idea of any one's being loved by Ellis Dorrance, and not loving in return.

It was just midnight when she had entered Florence's room; the gray tints of a winter's dawn were streaking the blue-black, star-sprinkled east when she departed.

Florence slept long and heavily, and the sun at nine o'clock found her just awakening from her unnatural exhausting slumber.

The moment she opened her eyes she observed the change of garments.

She sprung to her feet in a sudden passion of alarm; and then she saw the hue of hands and arms.

A shriek burst from her lips; and another, followed by a series of low, wailing moans.

It was so terribly suggestive of the fate Ellis Dorrance had prophesied to her if she refused to marry him.

And still it was so vague.

What was his object in this metamorphosis? What would he gain by it?

And then, of a sudden, she missed her hair.

She raised her hands to her head, and felt the short, crispy curls.

The hot blood boiled madly in her veins; grief and terror struggled for the ascendancy neither gained.

She strove to gain egress from the apartment, but in vain; and it was high noon when Isabel came to her, her dinner on a plate.

Florence almost dragged her to the floor in her passionate attempts to take hold of her hands, and her tears streamed over her strange, wild eyes, that, only cognizant of the madness in her own breast, failed to notice the stern pallor on her jailer's features, or the cold, steely gleam of the bright, pitiless eyes.

"Ida! what does this mean?"

"Ida!" cried Florence, passionately. "I am not 'Ida.' Who has done this thing, this accursed thing? Who dared do it?"

A low, unmusical laugh issued from Isabel's mouth.

"Do what, child? besides, I am in a hurry for you to eat; I shall discharge Mary, and take you on my tour to England in her place, as lady's maid."

"England! 'lady's maid!' surely I am in some horrid nightmare! Wake me! wake me! or I shall die from fright!"

"Nonsense, Ida. Eat your dinner."

"I will not eat! I will starve myself to death first!"

"No you won't. Listen, while I tell you what I shall do—what *you* shall do."

Isabel sat down on the side of the bed; her face still wearing that merciless look it had taken when Gussie Palliser had revealed Ellis Dorrance's treachery.

"I shall not call you Ida during this interview, because no one knows better than I that you are really Florence Arbuthnot. There—sit quietly down while I finish my story."

"A week or less ago, Dorrance came to me and arranged for Ida Glenville, an heiress, who was to be 'put out of the way,' to come here, and be closely guarded by me, the only one, besides Jim Palmer, his valet, who knows the secret."

"Trusting him as I ever had done, I believed his story; never dreaming he loved *you*, too, until I saw how very pretty you were, and then I suspected at once. He denied any regard for you, as you have done for him; but he lied, for another of his sweethearts came to me, urged by her jealous espionage, and laid bare his treble-dyed blackness of heart. You may think I was wild to believe her, a perfect stranger, but, mind you, I had been led to doubt him the moment I saw you."

"Well, Florence Arbuthnot, *you* shall not impose upon me. You have endeavored to make me think you don't care for him; you pretend—and I know by his instructions—you fear him; and I am going to do just the very worst thing I can do. I am going to take you at your word."

"You were as beautiful a girl as ever I saw when you entered the Haunted House last night; but Ellis Dorrance will not be so proud of you when he sees you again. I have sworn to revenge myself on him, and because I hate you on his account, I shall use you to accomplish my ends. See there?"

She suddenly thrust a hand-mirror before Florence's eyes. A wild peal of terror fell from her lips as the reflection met her gaze.

"Have pity on me! I will swear by all that is sacred on earth and in heaven that I despise Ellis Dorrance more than you do! I swear to you on my knees that I am engaged to marry another—Mr. Arch Chessom, who lives near Beechcrest. Send to him; oh, let Mary go bring him, and he will give you all the money you want for me! Believe me—pray, pray, believe me!"

Isabel smiled grimly.

"Believe you! well, perhaps I do, but it's all the same. He is false to me, and I am resolved to strike a blow home to him, while I have the opportunity."

"Think now you loved him, and remember I love Mr. Chessom just as well! Please send for him, and he can tell you how I fear and hate Mr. Dorrance."

"I am not acquainted with this Mr. Chessom: why should I be, when I have only been a week in this locality? I only came when he telegraphed me that he wanted me; the Haunted House is only occupied a few weeks in the shooting season, when he brings his friends out. If it will gratify you to know where we are, yonder is Beechcrest, three miles distant. The nearest house is a very elegant one they call some one's Pride."

Florence sprung to the window; truly the tower of Chessom's Pride was not a mile off.

"And it is Arch's home! I must go from here. I will go!"

"I shall be sorry to use force to subdue you. The whole story lies in a word, namely: that I know you never again as Florence; from this moment you are Ida, my quadroon servant girl. To-morrow we leave this house, by carriage to New York, to take the first English steamer. Attempt to disobey my instructions, and, believe me, I will not hesitate to kill you—not to bring trouble to myself, mind you—but there are poisons, and poisonous inhalations, and we jealous Italians often use them, accidentally, you know. They leave no trace behind."

Florence shuddered at the low, horrible tone, so musical in its fearful earnestness.

What could she do? a prisoner and threatened with death if she dared disobey.

There was no possible choice; life was very precious, and there remained a chance of escape in New York, where she would tell her story to the very first man she saw on the streets—it might be Arch.

Isabel seemed to fathom her very thoughts, for she said:

"Telling your story will be useless, for I shall take good care to spread the report wherever I go, that you are an intelligent, harmless lunatic, whose vagaries alter; the present being that you are a certain Miss Arbuthnot; and, remember, even your own mother would not know you."

Poor Florence! the darkness was very dense around her.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ALARM.

Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot had returned from their friendly vigil several hours earlier than they expected; and, anxious as was the lady to congratulate Florence on her engagement with Ellis Dorrance, she did not disturb that young lady's slumbers; deciding that undue haste might strengthen the suspicions already strong as death.

Breakfast was just over, and still Florence had not come down, when Ellis Dorrance was announced.

He was very stern, almost angry, in his demeanor.

"Mr. Arbuthnot, madame, I have intruded thus early to demand the reason of my fruitless waiting last night. I spent an hour in the parlor without seeing your daughter. May I beg an interview this morning?"

Mrs. Arbuthnot rose from her chair in speechless wonder.

"Not see her!" echoed her husband, in a bewildered way. "Why didn't you see her?"

"That is the question I came to have answered."

"Not see her!" repeated Mrs. Arbuthnot.

"That is strange! I will summon her down at once. No, I will go myself to her room."

She walked quickly up the stairs, and tapped on the door of Florence's apartment. Only perfect silence answered her; she rapped more loudly, and a little impatiently; then called:

"Florence, never mind if you're not dressed. I wish to come in."

She waited a second, then opened the door, partly vexed, partly surprised at the long delay.

A cry burst from her lips as she saw the bed had been unused; the square, ruffled pillows where they had lain in smooth state all the preceding day.

Then she glanced affrightedly around the room, and saw the note.

She clutched it eagerly, and read it through, a red, intense flame seeming to come from her eyes, and a gray, deathly paleness creeping around her lips.

With no audible word she turned and went down-stairs, and silently laid the paper before the two men.

Arbuthnot snatched it, and read it aloud.

"The deuce! the—the—what does it mean, anyhow? Dorrance, look at that!"

Ellis took it, and then laid it down again, as he spoke:

"This is what I have feared, expected—"

"Heavens, man! how can you stand still there, knowing she has gone with that rascal I hate above ground? How can you coolly say you 'feared' and 'expected'? Why don't you start off, post-haste, and find 'em? If I catch him, the villain!"

Mrs. Arbuthnot stood, still pallid and trembling, by the hastily-vacated breakfast-table.

"Dorrance will be useless, I fear," she said, at

length. "But, Mr. Arbuthnot, go at once to Chessom's Pride, and acquaint the family. Possibly they may have heard him mention where he was going."

Her eyes glittered coldly as she gave her directions.

"What will be the good?" asked Dorrance, gloomily. "They are married, doubtless, ere this, and he can protect his wife. If they are not—well, I'm sure I shouldn't care to—"

"Hold on!" shouted Arbuthnot, hotly. "Look out what you say about that girl! She is as good and pure as the falling snow, whatever she does."

"I'll remember, sir. Also, allow me to jog your memory regarding the fact of your sworn oath that she should be mine. How am I to look upon that now?"

There was coming a dangerous light in Dorrance's eyes, a certain expression that Mr. Arbuthnot never liked; and he paled under it.

"How could I keep it, Ellis? Haven't I worked for you to the best of my ability? and now, when she has fooled you as well as me, am I to blame?"

"I think so; a father should have taken better care of his only daughter."

Arbuthnot reddened angrily.

"Be careful, Ellis, how you speak. Remember it is not too late yet to—you know what. Besides, you can't afford to give her up yet. If you lose her after all these years, it'll be a more serious loss than if we never had undertaken the game."

"Mr. Arbuthnot, we will not discuss that point; it was settled when she was a child that I was to have her, to end the little difficulty I got into. We will still adhere to that opinion. I shall go on a tour of discovery myself—by the by, she is under age."

Mr. Arbuthnot's face lightened as he replied:

"I had forgotten that. Yes, she can be brought home; and, Ellis, the very best thing you can do is to start right off. Don't forget the interest you have at stake."

He spoke in a confidential, meaning voice.

"I'm off, then."

Dorrance bowed to the two, and hastened off, a smile of utter triumph on his face as he went through the streets. Mr. Arbuthnot went out immediately after, direct to Chessom's Pride.

Beautifully fair it was in the early morning sunshine, its inmates all unconscious of the storm about to break upon their heads.

Arch was preparing to ride to the village, to learn why Florence had not written to him; he had fully resolved to go to her home and demand an interview, when Mr. Arbuthnot was shown into the morning breakfast-room, where the family had not as yet assembled. Arch was astonished, yet extended his hand with easy cordiality.

"Mr. Arbuthnot, I am glad to see you. Will you take a chair? Have you breakfasted?"

But the man refused the offered hand, with hot anger in his face.

"Don't insult me! I demand to know where she is; where have you left her, since I am astonished at seeing you here?"

"Where is who—you can mean but one, and that is your daughter. Do you not know yourself, sir?"

Consternation and alarm were visible on Chessom's face, and he searchingly scanned the man's countenance.

"Do I know?" he repeated, bitterly. "I wish to Heaven I did know! And you have the impudence to ask me such a question. Answer me, at once; where have you taken my girl?"

"I have not seen her for a fortnight. I don't know what you mean, unless—God forbid!—danger has come to her through that black-hearted scoundrel, Dorrance!"

Arbuthnot reddened.

"A scoundrel, eh? Not half so much as yourself! But all I want to know is, where's Florence? I will have an answer, or you shall be arrested within an hour!"

Arch paled; it was a stinging insult; but his alarm for Florence overpowered all other feelings.

"Mr. Arbuthnot, I wish I knew. Until this moment I supposed she was at home."

Mr. Arbuthnot handed him the forged letter.

"Look at that, will you?"

An exclamation of surprise burst from Arch's lips.

"I am mystified! Florence never wrote that! and certain it is I never signed it. Depend upon it, sir, there's foul play somewhere. I suspect Dorrance."

"And I know it's you. Dorrance left my house not an hour ago, as thoroughly crushed and heart-broken as a man can be. And you,

here, in your fine house, can dare tell me you don't know where you have taken my daughter to! Sir, the law shall compel you to tell! and I'll have a policeman here before the noon."

Arch bit his lip to keep back the angry words.

"I am as truly wounded and enraged as you can be, sir, for I love Florence dearly. But all I can say I have said; all I can do shall be done to find her."

There was excitement in Arch Chessom's handsome face, that only the more convinced Mr. Arbuthnot of his guilt; and then, when Arch bade him good-morning and begged to be excused, so keen was his alarm on Florence's part, Mr. Arbuthnot's wrath was greater than before.

"You refuse to tell me, sir: you request me to go home; but all of this can't convince me you are not the greatest rogue out of jail."

And he went out, trembling in his vexatiousness.

CHAPTER X.

FROM HYENA TO HAWK.

AFTER Isabel Lefevre had so cruelly made known her intentions to Florence, she left her alone to complete the preparations for her hastily decided trip for England.

Had it been possible, Isabel would not have gone that day, for two reasons. One of which was, she desired to see Gussie Palliser again; the other, a burning disposition to hurl Ellis Dorrance's rudeness in his face.

So she packed her trunks, sent Mary with a message to Lakeview for Gussie Palliser to call next noon, and then waited for the interview with Dorrance.

Once before dusk she went up to Florence, and left a light, with her supper.

Slowly the evening passed away to the terrified girl, and when the distant clock at Beechcrest struck out nine slow, distinct strokes, it seemed to her a very death-knell.

She dared not sleep; she dared not partake of the food Isabel had left her; so she sat by the high window, looking down on the far-off twinkling lights of Beechcrest, wondering whether all hope and joy and happiness was over for her forever.

Utter misery was in possession of her heart, as she glanced, shivering, over the repulsive disguise Isabel had wrought, and thought how her way was hedged closely up. Yet she resolved to proclaim the truth in New York city, let the consequences be what they might.

Suddenly a slight noise smote her ear. Then a low, cautious rap on her door was followed by the pronouncing of her name, in a strange, kindly voice.

"Miss Arbuthnot! Miss Florence!"

She sprung to her feet in a sudden delirium of hope.

"Come in. I am unable to open the door. But come in and save me, I pray."

"I have come to save you, Miss Florence. I am your friend, and Mr. Chessom's. He discovered your whereabouts and sent me to rescue you. The carriage waits just below the house."

"God bless you! I am all ready—but how can I come out? Can't you break the door?"

"I can, but the noise will reach Miss Lefevre's ears. Is there no way to come out? No window opening on a balcony?"

Florence eagerly examined the windows. There was none, and in returning despair, she felt the tears springing to her eyes.

"I see no way," she said, presently, plaintively; "and if you saw me, you might not know me, for I am dressed in most horrid clothes, and the Italian woman has colored my skin brown."

An indignant cry fell from the stranger's lips.

"How dare she! Never fear, Miss Florence, but that I'll know you; your voice is natural, at least."

Then, after a moment's silence, he suddenly exclaimed:

"The ventilator, over the door! You can climb up by the table—have you one?—or the bureau or a washstand; you can creep through, and I will catch you."

Alive only to the one absorbing hope of escape, Florence eagerly dragged the light pine chest of drawers underneath the door, and lifted the one chair upon it.

There was room for her to climb to the wide, dusty, open space, and with her eager, wistful eyes she looked down upon her rescuer.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Florence, you'll not fall."

In a second she had dropped down in Jim Palmer's outstretched arms.

"Oh, thank you! thank you! let us hurry out as quickly as we can. Do you know the way? Do you think any one hears us?"

They were silently descending the stairs.

"No," was his whispered reply. "I will explain after we get clear of the house."

At the lower hall he nervously opened the door, and they walked out into the fresh night air, and Florence thought never was life so sweet before.

Jim Palmer lifted her into the carriage and wrapped the blankets carefully around her.

"Mr. Chessom would never forgive me if you caught a cold."

"Darling Archer."

And her eyes lighted up in a fond, affectionate glow.

"He's a fine young man, sure enough, Miss Florence, and very nearly wild at your disappearance. It was only to-day he learned of your whereabouts."

"How, Mr. Palmer, how?" she asked, eagerly.

Palmer shook his head.

"That is more than I know, you see. I suppose he'll tell you all about it when you get to Chessom's Pride."

"Am I to go to Chessom's Pride?"

A delicious little smile played on her lips.

"So he said, by the back road, for fear they'd miss you at the Haunted House, and be sure to follow on the main turnpike. It's a little further and lonelier, but that don't signify."

"Chessom's Pride!" repeated Florence, half-caressingly, as the carriage dashed on; then to Mr. Palmer:

"If I only could get this disfiguring dye from my face and hair before I see him."

Palmer did not answer for a second; then he spoke, half-apologetically:

"I s'pose my old aunt's house on the plank road'd be too far for you to go? You might fit up there a little, and borrow a dress of my cousin Kate."

"I wish I could! Would it take very long?"

Her eyes were piercing though the keen darkness, but she could not see his face.

"An hour, about; but I wouldn't mind that if you think Mr. Chessom wouldn't. Only I don't quite like to take a lady like you to such a poor place."

Florence laughed; the first merriment that she had indulged in in all those awful hours.

"As if I cared! Besides, Mr. Palmer, your kindness entirely overbalances their poverty. I wish you would drive around that way."

"All right! it's just as you say, Miss Florence."

He urged the horses into a faster trot, and the carriage dashed along, bearing Florence every second nearer and nearer to a yawning pit.

And Jim Palmer, smiling under his rough fur cap, chirruped to the horses and chuckled to himself.

"My lucky star is in the ascendant! Poor innocent child, to believe my trumped-up story! Aunt and cousin Kate! Well, I've got her, at any rate!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE EMPTY ROOM.

TRUE to his word, Ellis Dorrance came to the Haunted House that evening at the appointed hour.

Mary admitted him to Isabel's presence at once, who awaited him with a knowledge in her heart illly calculated to render his call as delightful as he had anticipated.

He had been congratulating himself the past few hours on the bold *coup d'état* he had consummated; Florence Arbuthnot a prisoner under the surveillance of her fiery-hearted rival, Isabel Lefevre. Perhaps the only drawback to the wicked pleasure he enjoyed was the knowledge that Gussie Palliser and he were enemies.

In the very depths of his soul he was sorry it was so; for, try as he might to persuade himself to the contrary, and pretend he cared nothing for it, it was a disagreeable disappointment to Ellis Dorrance to be so suddenly deprived of Gussie's charming society, especially when he realized the manner in which she had become possessed of his secret, that he had guarded so carefully from her, and still intended to preserve until it suited him to divulge it.

So, all that day, he had chided himself for his clumsiness in permitting Gussie to learn of her rival, and of his foolishness in not healing the breach immediately it was made; and he went to Isabel Lefevre, fully determined after an interview with her prisoner, to seek Gussie and

effect a reconciliation. The moment he entered Isabel's presence, he experienced a sensation that told him there was evil brewing; a second glance at her dark, gloomy face and eyes, where a hidden fire smoldered, assured him of it; he thought Florence had prevailed upon her to believe what was the truth.

"Isabel, you have no word of welcome? It is the first time you ever withheld a kiss and a caress."

Her lip curled contemptuously.

"And it is the last. Miss Arbuthnot can possibly accommodate you."

She looked him steadily in the face, smiling when she saw the look of amazement overspread his features.

"Miss Arbuthnot! Who is she?"

Then Isabel laughed; a low, musical sound, that somehow made Dorrance feel that the ground under his feet was sliding.

"There is no need of any more childish masquerading. I certainly know, as well as you, that the young lady up-stairs is Florence Arbuthnot, whom you abducted from her room an hour or so before you brought her here."

A tense line gathered around Dorrance's lips, but he never flinched under the smiling, sardonic, defiantly-triumphant eyes that were piercing him through and through.

"It is a lie," he said, slowly.

"Granted that you sometimes indulge in the little prevarications yourself, Ellis, we will leave the disputed question. Suppose I were to tell you you have been darkly false to me?"

The suppressed rage in her stormy face, under her low, even tones, was disagreeable even to Ellis Dorrance, so bold in his badness.

"I should answer as I answered before."

"Ah! but you would not dare! Look at me, and see if I am in earnest."

And her flashing, scornful eyes were lurid in their gleaming wrath.

She suddenly sprung from her chair, where she had been indolently reclining, as one might imagine a leopardess crouching for a sudden, violent attack.

"I am in earnest; you have dared whisper love words to other women—this pretty Florence, and another, a dark-faced beauty, whose name I know. You dared do this when you thought I would not know it; and, because for months you have succeeded, you have grown foolhardy in your triumphs, and was childish enough to bring her here, thinking to blind my eyes because I have erst-time trusted and loved you."

Dorrance was dismayed at this outburst, and he was wondering how he could best refute what she said; but she began again, more wrathful than before.

"I tell you you have awakened a very devil in my heart! You have trifled with one who will not brook such an outrage! I shall mete out to you your own reward, Ellis Dorrance. You are in my hands, this very moment, to be used as I see fit."

A contemptuous laugh—he regretted the next moment—issued from his lips.

"You are beside yourself, Isabel! I know not what ideas you have in that pretty little head of yours; I only know you are talking sheerest nonsense. Call Mary to show me to Ida's room."

"No, sir. 'Ida' is no less a myth than 'Florence.' The beautiful, graceful girl you left here twenty-four hours ago is no more."

He wheeled sharply around.

"What do you mean? Have you dared to kill her? Isabel! answer me before I strike you down!"

He was deathly pale, and his eyes were intensely black in their anger.

She waved him off.

"Have you never heard of we hot-hearted Italiennes killing our rivals?"

"If you have, by —, I'll murder you, you woman!"

He strode fiercely to the hall door, but her little firm hand arrested him.

"Hark, Ellis Dorrance! Last night, when I learned of your treble perfidy, I vowed a vow, before high Heaven, to be avenged. This girl you think you love; this girl was in my power. So, Ellis Dorrance, through her I have touched you. I have made of her a mulatto girl, whom her own mother, or even you, would not recognize. I shall take her on a foreign tour—where, you need not know—as my maid. I have told her I would shoot her, or poison her, if she attempts to escape; she is mine, and you dare not prove who she is!"

The ringing triumph in her voice was maddening to the man who stood listening to her defiant tones.

His complexion grew more deathly pale; his eyes were insufferably brilliant in their concentrated glare; his hands were trembling from the horrible rage that was in his soul; when he spoke, his voice was low and husky.

"Isabel! lead me to her at once; and, as sure as there is a God in the Heavens above us, you shall suffer for this—if it be true! I doubt every word you say."

"As you please. Perhaps, when you see, you will believe?"

She led the way up the stairs, her fingers clasping a tiny stiletto in her pocket; she was on her guard.

But Ellis was only thinking of Florence; Isabel would dare the deed, he knew, despite what he had said. If she had, how could he regain her without exposing himself?

He ground his teeth in a paroxysm of rage, as Isabel turned the key and opened the door.

It pushed heavily, as if something was standing against it.

A second effort, and they stood within—an empty room!

Something like a howl of supremest wrath came from Dorrance's lips.

"You have done this, you fiend! you lying traitress!"

But Isabel, with whitened cheeks and parted lips, was standing in blank amaze at the signs of confusion in the room.

"As I hope for mercy, I did not know she was gone!" And when Dorrance saw her face he was constrained to believe her.

He pushed roughly past her; ran down the stairs and into the room for his hat and gloves, then dashed out into the dark night, with unspeakable thoughts flying madly through his brain.

"It is Chessom's doings! curses eternal light on him!"

CHAPTER XII.

OH, HOW NEAR.

If Ellis Dorrance and Isabel Lefevre were stupefied and stunned by finding the room vacant, Florence Arbuthnot was no less so, when she alighted from the carriage and entered the roadside cabin.

There was but one room, and it was desolate of human presence, almost of any signs of there ever having been a resident in it.

She turned to Jim Palmer with a troubled, inquiring gaze.

"I thought you said we should find your relatives here?"

"Did I? Really I don't remember what I did say; only I know I haven't a relative in the world."

He shut and barred the door as he spoke.

With a sick apprehension rushing over her soul, Florence turned to him.

"Why then did you bring me here, Mr. Palmer?"

But the wild, hunted look in her eyes told she had suspected the truth.

"Because I think you are just the prettiest, finest girl ashore, and I pitied you in that fourth-story room."

"And I am entrapped! Oh, God help me and save me!"

"No use praying so long as you can touch bottom, you know, Miss Florence. You don't think I'm going to kill you now, do you?"

She had retreated to the far end of the room, where the rays of the lantern Palmer had set on a rude table, penetrated the most.

Her lips were quivering, her heart frozen with despair and terror.

Palmer leaned nonchalantly against the door, looking satisfiedly at her.

"It's not so snug a place as I have seen, to be sure, but there's the advantage of the lonely road, where a traveler doesn't pass once a fortnight."

She trembled at the ill-concealed triumph in his tone.

"But, Mr. Palmer, why should you detain me? I'm sure I never harmed you, by word or deed to make you my enemy; and your friend, Mr. Chessom, will never forgive this of you."

"My friend, Mr. Chessom! that is rich! Why, my pretty Flo', I never have spoken a word to the young aristocrat of Chessom's Pride in my life. That was all gammon, you know, manufactured expressly for the occasion."

Florence grew deathly sick and horrified, and barely murmured the question:

"Who are you, then? why did you take me from there?"

"Because, when I drove you up from your house in Mr. Dorrance's carriage, I made up my mind you were too good for him, or Chessom, either; just about suited to me, in fact."

So I followed that black-eyed witch up-stairs to your room; came down when I saw where she put you, and removed one of the front door keys from the ring, so I might let myself in."

With dilating eyes Florence listened.

"But Flo, my beauty, you didn't know I had known you these years back? You didn't know I entered Ellis Dorrance's service only because I knew he was going to try for you, and I thereby would have a better chance? Bless you, my girl, I have been looking forward to this hour for ten years. Then, above all, I love you; more than Dorrance can or Chessom does."

A furtive glance at him thrilled Florence with awful dread.

What was she to do? alone with this man, at midnight, with a heavy oaken bar keeping her from liberty? She lowered her head and prayed; only such a prayer as one in direst peril could frame.

Palmer came over the rude, uncarpeted floor to her side.

"Florence, will you love me? I am not rich, I am not good, I know. But I am good enough to love you."

She rose from her chair, the tears falling from her eyes, as she laid her two hands on his arm.

"Oh, Mr. Palmer! think again of it! Just place your sister, if ever you had one, or your own dead mother in my place! And then have pity on me, and take me to my friends. Your conscience surely tells you what you ought to do."

"It does, my sweet, graceful pleader! it tells me to take you for my own forever!"

A pitiful cry came from her lips, as she buried her face in her hands, her wild sobs bursting from her agonized heart.

Palmer gazed at her in silent admiration a moment.

"I will tell you what I'll do, Florence. I will leave you here to-night, safely guarded, and come on the morrow evening; provided you will give me a kiss before I go."

He laid his hand on her shoulder; she shrunk away from the touch.

"Just as you say, Florence. Give me a kiss, and I'll go. Refuse, and—"

She sprang almost wildly to her feet.

"You'll go right away? You'll promise it?"

"Right away; I promise it."

She raised her face, and touched his cheek lightly with her lips; then pointed to the door.

"Now, please go."

"That delicious kiss tempts me to stay, but I'll keep my word to so fair a girl. *Au revoir!*"

He vaulted through a window, and then pushed a heavy shutter against it, locking it with a huge bolt on the outside.

Florence heard the noise of the carriage as the wheels crunched on the snow, and then she crouched down in a corner near the fire that blazed on the hearth.

A plentiful supply of fuel lay piled in the chimney-corner; a loaf of bread, a plate of butter and a pitcher of milk stood on the table; and she saw she was secured from physical discomfort at least.

A sensation of relief came to her as she thought she might yet escape before the morrow night; she ate heartily of the bread and butter and drank of the sweet, rich milk, and a feeling almost of buoyancy came over her when she had finished, for it was the first mouthful that had passed her lips since the eventful night.

Then, tired yet strengthened, she fell asleep; never waking until the broad daylight was streaming through the circular loopholes of the huge wooden shutters.

A breakfast like the supper, and then, a tour of investigation.

Hopefully she set about her work, almost confident she would somehow succeed in escaping; trying the shutters, doors, and sounding the solid wooden walls.

Then, when fatigued, but not discouraged, she climbed up on the table to peek out through the little round window.

It did look lonesome, the little patch of landscape she could see; the road, piled up with untrodden snow, where the one track told her how truly Palmer had said travel was very unfrequent; his tracks were the only ones on the broad, white expanse glistening in the morning sunlight.

A feeling of utter desolation stole over her as she looked out, wondering why all this trouble was sent upon her; wondering what Arch must think; wondering where he was.

A sound of merrily tinkling bells came of a sudden upon her ears, borne by a current of wind; a wild, new hope sprung up in her heart; she felt the blood dancing through her veins as the joyous noise came nearer and nearer.

Oh! if she could but scream, could but attract the attention of that Heaven sent passer-by!

Nearer came the sleigh; slower as it approached the huge drifts before the door of the cabin, and Florence could see it now.

A shrill scream burst from her lips.

The occupant was Arch Chessom!

He glanced up at the house as he caught the faint sound, then, apparently regarding it a wind-moan, turned away.

Florence, with her heart beating to an agonizing fury, her eyes almost starting from her head, called hoarsely to him; her voice deadened by the thick walls, until it was a mere articulate moan when it reached him.

He was going on; what could she do? what should she do, with salvation so near and yet so far?

Frantically she thrust out her hand and waved it; and then, when Arch sprung from the sleigh, she grew giddy from the excitement, reeled and fell.

Ever alive to the idea that she whom he sought was somewhere near him, Archer when he caught a momentary glimpse of a hand thrust from the hole, felt a wild thrill of hope that it, perchance, might be Florence; and yet, as he plunged through the snow, he could not but think how foolish was such a thought, for, of course, Dorrance would find a gilded prison for his bird.

He was on his way then to the city, and it being a better road for sleighing, and desiring to bring back several parcels for his mother, he had gone in the sleigh instead of the train. He had ample time, however, to stop a moment and indulge the wild curiosity in his soul.

The door was moveless; but, all of the shutters being fastened on the outside with huge iron bolts, ingress was a matter of comparative ease.

He leaped through one of the windows, and approached the prostrate figure; a pang of disappointment, at which he was vexed, thrilled his breast when he saw the dirty room, the shabbily-attired negro girl, with unkempt kinky hair, lying on the floor.

He touched her, spoke to her, looked at her, and was about to turn away, when his better nature told him the person was suffering, in some way or other, else why the signal evidently of distress—and this deep, death-like faint?

Then, with a courage and nobility few men possess, he determined to take her in his sleigh to the nearest house, wherever it might be, or whosoever it was, for attention.

With Arch Chessom to will was to do.

He lifted the figure in his arms, and laid her on the floor of the sleigh, with a robe over and under her.

If he had known, if he had but heard her voice as Palmer had done! but Fate was not to be appeased just then; the wicked was "to flourish as a green bay tree" yet longer before the inevitable downfall came.

So he drove on, watching for a house.

It was not twenty minutes' gallop, before the forbidding walls of the Haunted House loomed up.

He turned his horses' heads up the avenue, and drove round to the side entrance.

Mary came to the door.

"It is a half-frozen colored girl I picked up. You can warm her and feed her, can't you?"

He gave her a bill, and Mary turned down the buffalo-robe.

"Bress my stars! ef it ain't dat Ida!"

"I am glad you know her. Take her in with you; and give Mr. Chessom's compliments to the master of the house, whom I have not the pleasure of knowing."

He drove off, while Mary, her wrinkled, red face all smiles, carried poor, unconscious Florence in, and laid her down on the kitchen lounge.

"It's a pity missus hab gone! but I'll keep her anyhow! Maybe de boss giv me sumthin'."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LOST BIRD.

FIRED with rage, Ellis Dorrance had returned to Beechcrest, bemoaning his luck, and cursing the hour he had left Florence's pretty face lead him on.

What if it had been planned years ago, when Florence was a child, that he was to be her husband? What if it was true, that unless she became his wife, if certain affairs became known, he was liable to imprisonment?

He had been goaded into it first by selfishness; then when he began to admire Florence's pretty face, and had seen her evident dislike for him, his pride and willfulness had led him on and on—to this!

Away down in his heart he disliked Isabel

Lefevre; and only to his own thoughts did he whisper he truly loved Gussie Palliser, bright, winsome Gussie Palliser, whom he loved now better than before.

He had plenty of time to think of all these things as he walked rapidly toward the village; and among them was the resolve to seek a reconciliation with Gussie. He knew she was of a jealous, passionate disposition, and that he must be wary if he wanted to succeed.

How to effect this was a question of doubt; only a clean confession, and a humble apology would serve her.

Would she see him? He doubted it, and then, as he entered his room, he bethought him that Gussie must be on her visit to the Chessoms about now; there she would learn that Archer Chessom really loved Florence, and so she might be inclined to forgive him what he intended to explain plausibly.

But how communicate with her? Chessom's Pride was not open to him; a personal interview, even if granted, would be too hasty, too fiery. He would write, then; there was the beautiful white carrier-pigeon in the cage he had placed it.

Its wing was nearly healed: it would fly straight to Chessom's Pride; there was a romance about such a messenger that Gussie could not withstand.

He rung the bell for Palmer to ascertain whether or not Gussie had gone to Chessom's Pride; but Palmer was not within call, and not until an hour and a half later did he return, "from a visit to his aunt."

He was strangely jubilant, but Dorrance did not observe it.

"Jim, that Chessom's been too much for us! he's spirited her away from the Haunted House."

Palmer opened his eyes in the most amazed manner.

"No! Mr. Dorrance, I can't believe it."

"And that Italianne is as bad as he is," went on Dorrance. "She rigged her up a *la mulatta*, so she says, never dreaming that Chessom was going to liberate her! so if you come across any such—"

He paused significantly.

"I understand: only, Mr. Dorrance, I am about to change my business. I am sorry to leave your employ, but I think it best to leave America, and join my relatives in England."

A look of dismay shadowed Dorrance's face.

"I don't see how I can spare you, Palmer. You've been faithful—"

"And I'll ever keep secret what I know. Depend on that, Mr. Dorrance."

"If you could do me one more favor, Jim?"

"Anything in my power that can be done before to-morrow, at six. I shall leave Beechcrest then, forever."

Dorrance unfolded a roll of notes.

"Here is what is due you. Now, Jim, find out whether Miss Palliser is at Lakeview or Chessom's Pride."

When Palmer had said good-night, or good-morning, rather, for it was near three o'clock, Dorrance wrote a letter to Gussie, a letter that such a man knew so well how to write, one that in the fervor of its earnestness, intensity of passion, tenderly regretful apologies, was well calculated to appeal to the heart, however estranged, of the woman who had once loved him.

The gray shades of daydawn were looming up among the faint shining stars, when Dorrance sealed and directed the envelope to Miss Gussie Palliser, Chessom's Pride.

Early that forenoon, Palmer brought the desired information that Gussie had gone to Chessom's Pride that morning, and that Arch Chessom had gone to New York for a day or so, probably longer, to seek additional aid in finding Florence.

"So you see Mr. Chessom is as ignorant of her whereabouts as you are, Mr. Dorrance."

Ellis was surprised beyond measure, and he frowned darkly.

"Then it is the work of that Jezebel! I'll dispatch this at once, and go to the Haunted House. If there is anything in my power to do toward extorting a confession, it shall be done."

The rays of the sun were streaming athwart the window, when Ellis threw it open to admit the fresh, pure air.

On the sill, still in its cage, perched the carrier dove, whiter than the snow itself, its gentle eyes beaming brightly among the pure plumage.

The same blue ribbon Florence Arbuthnot had tied to its slender neck still hung there, and to it Ellis Dorrance attached the letter.

He softly caressed the downy white feathers,

as he held it in his hand, the missive on which so much depended swinging from its throat.

"Amazing stupidity! as if the fact of this dove returning to Chessom's Pride, bearing a letter from me, will not at once reveal my agency in the Arbutnot affair! Fool that I am! Ah, furies and—"

Well might he exclaim in that sharp tone, for the bird had flown from his grasp, and was soaring up into the clear, cold air.

An expression of impotent rage overspread his face, and he reached frantically after it.

"Curses alight on my foolishness! The Fates or the Furies are in league with that bird, and it is a sign I am to be thwarted in the end."

Then, after a moment's gaze at the white speck floating up, off and away, he dashed the window down and struck his clenched fist on the table.

"Thwarted! no! not if I wade through blood to victory. And now, for Isabel!"

CHAPTER XIV.

LOST.

FOR several hours Florence Arbutnot lay in a succession of fainting-spells, and it was not until toward noon that she became aware of her condition and whereabouts. She remembered how she had hailed Arch as he passed by; she recollected the dizziness and illness she had experienced; after that all was a blank until she saw Mary's face bending over her.

She essayed to rise, but discovered she was very much prostrated.

"Where's Mr. Chessom? where is the gentleman who got out of the sleigh at that cabin?" Her sharp, eager voice, her face all aglow with feverish earnestness, met a decided cooling from Mary.

"Oh, he's gone long ago. He left him compliments fur de mas'er, and gi' me a ten-dollar greenback to fetch ye around allsuar', honey."

"He brought me here, then? and left me with you? Oh-h-h-h; I comprehend! he didn't know me in this disguise! Oh, Mary! Mary! you are a woman! you have a woman's heart! Do help me get this off, and show me the way home! The gentleman will give you ten times that money, if you will."

Mary folded and unfolded the precious money thoughtfully.

"Dunno what Miss Isabel say to dat! Ye see she's gone down into de village to see a pusson, and, jest like's not she'll take a notion to trabel to Europe afore I see hide or hare o' her again. She's so cur'us, Miss Isabel is, no countin' on her at all."

"But you know I'm white, don't you? for you saw me; you believe I am Miss Arbutnot, don't you?"

Mary laughed, not ill-naturedly, at Florence's nervous question.

"To be sure I does; 'cause, you see, Miss Isabel she tells me just afore she went."

Florence caught her arm tightly.

"Give me water, then, to wash this nasty stuff off, get me my clothes again, Mary, and you shall keep the jewelry. Mr. Chessom will reward you, besides."

"Ef I thought Miss Isabel 'd stay away—"

"She will, I know. Besides, Mary, if she should come in, I'll hide anywhere you tell me! Please, dear, kind Mary!"

"S'pose now, first off, you know, you tell me who tooked you off last night?"

There was a little gleam in the negress's eyes.

"Indeed, I'll tell you anything! It was that wicked Mr. Palmer, that drives Mr. Dorrance's carriage; he said he had come from Mr. Chessom, the gentleman who brought me here, so I was glad enough to escape. But he deceived me; and oh, Mary! you never can know all I have endured in one little week! If Mr. Chessom, in the goodness of his heart had not rescued me, I don't know what would have happened! Now you'll wash me off, and let me have my dress, won't you?"

She smiled brightly into the old woman's face, that relaxed at its sweet winsomeness despite the homely brown skin.

"Well, well, I dunno as it ken hurt anybody. Only, if Miss Isabel comes—"

"Yes, yes; I know! Now for soap and hot water."

A long, hard hour's work was necessary before Florence was herself again; then she attired herself in a long dress, with its blue ruffles, her arms, pretty as a girl's, prettier, if possible, with her dark hair curling in loose tendrils all over her head and on her white forehead.

She sat down in Isabel's cushioned arm-chair, and, leaning back, she began to walk was sim-

ply impossible; the unshoveled snow lay knee-deep along the road, and the day was windy and intensely cold. She fully recognized the folly of attempting it.

Carriages seldom passed that way; but she determined that the very first should be signaled; unless she could prevail upon Mary to go to the village and procure aid.

This, however, she found utterly impossible to do; Mary would not stir from the house until Miss Isabel came or sent; besides, knowing as she did, with her natural shrewdness, Dorrance's affair with Florence, she was resolved to retain the girl there until he or Isabel came.

It was not for long; just as the sun was going down, Ellis Dorrance came up to the door, with a paper in his hand.

"It's from Miss Isabel, Mary; I was coming to see her when the telegraph messenger gave me this for you. She will not condescend to notify me of her comings and goings."

It was a telegram telling Mary to stay at the Haunted House as long as she wished; after to return to the old place; she (Isabel) would sail for England the next day, per Albion, for an indefinite time.

Isabel had not given her reasons for the sudden step; and, as it removes her from our story, we will explain. She had gone to Lakeview to tell Gussie Palliser of Florence's sudden disappearance; had learned that Gussie was visiting, for a time, at Chessom's Pride.

Thus disappointed of communicating with Gussie, although she left a sealed note marked "private," she had gone by train to New York; partly on business of her own, partly from a conviction that Dorrance had taken Florence secretly away, and that they might possibly propose a tour to England.

She resolved to examine the lists of entered passengers on several leading steamships; to her anger and wrath, she found on one the name—"Mr. James Palmer and lady."

Knowing Palmer to be in the secret employ of Dorrance, she instantly supposed Florence to be the "lady," and her own faithless lover the gentleman who had borrowed his *valet de chambre's* name. With exultant triumph she secured a state-room, registered an assumed name; made a few necessarily hasty preparations, and went aboard the Albion; determined to keep closely to her state-room until they were fairly at sea; and then confront him with the truth she knew he feared and dreaded; the truth she had sworn never to reveal, but which now, she justly decided, was due herself to tell.

She telegraphed the last thing before she went on board. It is needless to state her vexation, disappointment, or chagrin, to learn, when miles and miles away, that she was thwarted.

A fortnight later, and the news rung through both continents: the Albion was burned at sea, and not a soul left to tell the story.

Florence heard Dorrance's voice in the other room, which he had entered before Mary could give the warning she would have done, had not the surprise of the telegram driven all thoughts of Florence from her mind.

Her first impulse was to fly anywhere—anywhere from his hated presence; she obeyed that sudden intention, and, with wild eyes, sprung toward the door just as a large, white hand with a costly ring gleaming on its finger, arrested her flight.

"Can it be possible? Is it really true I am vouchsafed this great pleasure? Florence, come back!"

She turned on him a proud, yet beseeching look!

"Mr. Dorrance, have I not been persecuted enough?"

"When I left you here, Florence, I solemnly assure you I had no idea of what was to befall you before we met again. What intervened between that night and this I know nothing of, except it was the work of a jealous woman."

Florence had never seen him so thoroughly in earnest; and yet she was afraid to trust him.

"Where you have been I know not; will you tell me?"

"I do not know myself; I only know the name of the man who took me in the carriage and locked me in the dreary, lonely cabin. I think you know him, Mr. Dorrance, for 'birds of a feather flock together.' His name is Palmer."

Dorrance sprung from the chair, an oath on his lips. "The rascal! the villainous liar! So that is why he wished to leave my service to-day, is it? Leaves Beechcrest for England at six to-night, hey?"

He paced to and fro in the long room, with a countenance expressive of the rage in his heart.

"It seems I am not the only one who admires

your pretty face. Florence, how did you escape from the cabin?"

Florence raised her head haughtily.

"I prefer not to talk further on the subject, Mr. Dorrance. I have only to ask that you will take me home at once."

A loud, incredulous laugh answered her.

"That is an admirable piece of effrontery! Do you think I shall relinquish my prize as soon as I have regained it?"

She paled a little but her answer was firm and undaunted.

"Then I shall go myself. Mr. Dorrance, I tell you there will be no use of endeavoring to persuade me to be your wife; an imprisonment of twenty years would not change my mind. To save trouble, you may as well let me go first as last."

Dorrance gazed admiringly at her flushed, eager face, with its red, parted lips, and duskily flashing eyes. He waited several minutes in respectful silence, and Florence thought he was about to relent, when he said:

"Upon my word, Florence, you are prettier than ever with your hair short!"

Florence turned sadly away to the window, her lips quivering. Dorrance followed her.

"Florence, I will tell you what I am going to do. This house shall be your home; Mary shall be your servant; I will be lord and slave; and you will be mistress. But, Florence, it will necessarily be a prison-house because you will not accede to my wishes. So content yourself, Florence, as best you can. I will bring you books and music, clothes and—"

She confronted him with her bright, flashing eyes.

"How dare you? How dare you?" and she stamped her foot, angrily. "To injury you add insult! Not an article will I touch from your hands, unless it be food to keep me in strength to defy you! Appoint me my prison-cell, Ellis Dorrance, and I will go to it. I will live in it and die in it, with the sweet consciousness that I will not be bought or coerced by such a villain as you! These are my terms."

A little, impertinent laugh came tantalizingly from his lips.

"Captives do not dictate terms, you know."

Then he called to Mary to spread supper for them, and Florence, fearing lest he might drug her victuals, was glad to partake of the same food he ate.

Gradually the dusk drew on, and after lamps had been lighted, Dorrance drew an easy-chair and the light oval table nearer the fire.

He took the afternoon's paper from his overcoat-pocket, and ensconced himself cosily in the genial warmth and light to read.

Florence drew frigidly back in the shadowy corner, her proud, pale face gleaming in the darkness like some rare marble statue; her eyes, covered by the long, drooping lashes, filled with the proud, indignant tears she would not suffer to fall.

Mary was at work in her kitchen; the windows and doors were fast closed and locked, and Florence thought how inexpressibly lonely and still it was.

She wondered if Arch would go back home by the same route, or had he already gone, and left her behind to grope about in the awful darkness that had come upon her?

Of Mr. and Mrs. Arbutnot she scarce thought at all, and yet she could not help wondering how they regarded her absence; if they knew how it had happened, and were seeking for her.

Dear Arch! how disfigured she must have been that his loving eyes did not recognize her; she knew her voice would have done what her altered face could not. All the horrors of the past night came vividly before her, and she was forced to acknowledge that it was better as it was; for there was creature comfort here, at the Haunted House, and a woman besides herself.

Then a sudden imperious summons made her spring from her chair, part in alarm, more in wild hope that rescue had come.

Dorrance dashed down the paper, and wheeled sharply around, his face pale with an awful fear that Florence's friends were on his track.

Then, when Mary had opened the door, Jim Palmer sprung in! And the door closed again.

CHAPTER XV.

SHOWING HIS TEETH.

It was with feelings of inexpressible exultation that Jim Palmer made his preparations before going after Florence at the cabin.

He had been paid up by Dorrance, and with his money he had gone to New York, secured passage in the Albion, purchased an elegant

outfit of clothing for Florence, and then hired a coach and horses.

Himself attired in garments of the finest material and best maker, he had gone alone to the place in which he had left her.

Tying his horses, he had hurried to the door, marveling at the want of light gleaming between the chinks.

He unbolted the window nearest the back of the cabin, not noticing the front one that Arch Chessom had unfastened; jumped through, and then struck a light.

The fire had burned out hours before, and a chilly shiver seized him as he strode to the middle of the room.

A second's surveillance betrayed the fact that Florence had escaped!

Chagrined and enraged, he sat down a moment to collect his thoughts.

"It was not Dorrance's work," he reasoned, "because Dorrance had been at home nearly all day with him. It was Isabel's, that black-haired witch at the Haunted House!"

No sooner had he arrived at that conclusion than he returned to the carriage, turned his horses' heads toward the Haunted House, and galloped on.

Wild thoughts were afloat in his brain as he rattled along; he would compel Isabel to give Florence up, under pain of revealing her criminality in transforming Florence from white to black.

He had arranged the mode of word attack, and when he sprung from the carriage, a little distance from the house, he concluded to act strongly on the offensive from the first.

Thus he strode to the door, and knocked decidedly.

To his utter surprise, he confronted Ellis Dorrance, when he had so surely hoped to meet Isabel Lefevre.

For a moment he was confounded; then, recollecting that Dorrance did not know of his escapade with Florence Arbuthnot, he resolved to put a bold face on, and manufacture the most plausible excuse he could, for his sudden, evidently unwonted appearance.

On the other side, Dorrance, who was infinitely relieved when he saw who the intruder was, having feared so much more, determined at once to make known to Palmer his acquaintance with his actions.

Palmer did not observe Florence, who had shrinkingly retired to the most dark, distant corner.

"Well, you are not off for England, I see?"

Dorrance's tone was full of cutting irony, that only a knowledge of the secret of the other could give.

"Not yet; I forgot an important bit of news I heard this afternoon, and drove up to tell you, since I did not find you at your boarding-house. Miss Palliser has returned from Chessom's Pride, and—"

A hot flush came to Dorrance's cheeks; it was not agreeable to him that Florence should hear what was probably coming; so he interrupted Palmer.

"Yes, exactly. By the way, Jim, where were you last night about eleven o'clock? from then on until after two?"

He stared wrathfully at Palmer, who returned it with interest.

"I do not know that I am in duty bound to answer any such questions."

"When you take it upon yourself to interfere in my private arrangements, and turn traitor to the one you pretend to serve, I think I have the right to demand an answer from you."

Palmer knew then that, by some mysterious agency, Dorrance knew his villainy; and he instantly resolved to fight for every inch of ground.

Dorrance's face grew darker and stormier, then he burst forth in a torrent of passion:

"Why did you assist Florence Arbuthnot to escape from this house? Why did you convey her to that lonely cabin on the Stony Road? Why did you leave her there a guarded prisoner?"

His tones were intensely bitter.

Palmer looked coolly at him, his light gray eyes almost white in their glare.

"For the same reason you took her from her home several nights ago."

A hoarse, sarcastic laugh came from Dorrance.

"Good! then you perhaps imagined the young lady was in love with you?"

"Perhaps so; at any rate, I was in love with her."

"You dare to aspire to her hand! Jim Palmer—"

Palmer smiled with supreme indifference.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked, carelessly.

"I ought to, after being your master for years and years."

"Nominally, yes; but, after all, Dorrance, it is I whom am master. I could enlighten your bewildered understanding on several subjects that have been transpiring these last ten or fifteen years; regarding the—"

A vague fear seized Dorrance; besides, there was Florence sitting in that dusky corner, listening to every word.

"That will do, Palmer. You may be excused from the premises now."

It was hardly the language to use to a man like Jim Palmer, and Dorrance saw it too late, for Palmer turned sharply on him.

"You excuse me, you black-hearted knave? Don't attempt to insult me, or it will be worse for you; besides, when you make a deadly enemy of the man who knows your secrets, all about the secrets of those you serve, it is apt to prove a bad move. So be careful, Dorrance, for your own sake."

His patronizing air maddened Dorrance.

"I defy you and your secrets! Begone, or I'll assist you!"

He drew a pistol from his pocket, and pointed it at Palmer, who sneered at it.

"I confess that's not pleasant. You're a capital shot, I know, and I value my life quite too much to stand for a target. I'll retire, Ellis Dorrance, but mark these words. When you least expect or desire it, I will confront you with those secrets you sneer at; then, and not till then, will you know *who I am*."

CHAPTER XVI.

THWARTED.

As soon as Palmer had gone, Ellis Dorrance turned to Florence.

"You are quite in demand, you perceive. I hope the fact will not add to your stubbornness."

She flushed at his rude address.

"Nothing can add to, or detract from, my resolution. I repeat, that I will die as your prisoner rather than live as your wife."

"Time will change all this," he returned, lightly.

He went from the room, locking the door after him; he was gone, probably twenty minutes, then returned.

"I have secured the doors and windows on the floor above, that Isabel used, that now is yours. Mary, attend Miss Florence."

Stepping as queenly as a princess of the blood royal, Florence went up to her prison, and dismissed the negress at the door.

The suit of rooms was pleasantly lighted and warmed. The accommodations plain, but good; and at a glance she saw escape was impossible.

As soon as she had retired from the dining-room, Dorrance left the house; his horse was in the rickety old stable, and he led him out, for his return to Beechcrest.

Several things were on his mind as he rode slowly along.

First, was the momentarily increasing desire to be friends again with lissome Gussie Palliser; and now that the letter must have ere this been read by her, accidental as the sending had been, he was in a state of feverish anxiety.

Would she refuse his overtures? would she accept his apologies? or had he separated himself forever from her?

Co-equal with this wish on his part was the regret that he had implicated himself so with Florence; to be sure, no one—except Chessom and Palmer, the former by intuition, the latter by absolute knowledge—knew of his complicity in the affair; and while all Beechcrest was ringing with the news of Florence Arbuthnot's elopement, it was universally whispered—not spoken, for the Chessoms were too rich and proud to have anything positively told about them—that young Arch knew where she was.

Mr. Arbuthnot had not hesitated to spread these reports; and the two facts of Ellis Dorrance's being seen in the village every day, while Arch, in his rapid detective tours about the country, was never seen, helped the gossip.

Gussie Palliser alone knew the true state of affairs; and, during her brief visit at Chessom's Pride—brief, because of her own unsettled state of mind, as well as the peculiar situation in which the family was placed—had ascertained, to her entire satisfaction—which accounted for her visit to the Haunted House, after her watch of Dorrance the one preceding day and evening from the window of the hotel directly opposite the Arbuthnot's mansion—that Florence had gone with Dorrance.

Later, the next day or so, in a conversation on the subject, Gussie had found out that Arch really loved Florence, and that Florence returned that love; thus partially exonerating Dorrance.

And *only* partially, for his sin was none the less; indeed she concluded it was the greater, for forcibly abducting one who did not love him.

While at Chessom's Pride, she received Ellis's letter, and that same day, as Arch returned, went back to Lakeview.

Of all this Dorrance was yet ignorant; but, as he neared the village, he found himself resolved to pay a call at the Arbuthnots', and, if at all possible, rid himself of the affair.

He passed the night at his rooms, and the next morning, after a careful toilet—for he was going to attempt an interview with Gussie Palliser—started for the house of the Arbuthnots.

It being just the village dinner hour, he found Mr. Arbuthnot at home, who greeted him warmly.

"We didn't know that you were ever coming again. Where have you kept yourself?"

Dorrance began to feel it would require all his moral courage to confess the affair; a glimpse of Gussie's sparkling eyes seemed to rise before him, and he plainly saw Florence's pale features, so proudly contemptuous, so stubbornly resolved, and he plunged straight into the deepest of the difficulty, with a sort of recklessness that men feel when they have an idea they are not succeeding exactly as they would wish.

Dorrance had become possessed of that feeling, somehow, since Palmer had shown a knowledge of his (Ellis's) secrets; for it has been perceived there were episodes in Dorrance's life he would well like to be kept still; and how Palmer, of all men, had learned—if he knew—was a sort of mystery to him.

One of these past troubles was in his mind as he looked at Mr. Arbuthnot's face, so ugly in its set, willful lines; but "nothing venture, nothing have," he thought.

"Where have I been? You will be surprised to learn I came from Florence last evening."

The listeners sprung to their feet in a simultaneous gesture of amaze.

"From Florence?" echoed Mr. Arbuthnot. "Then how the deuce did you find out where Chessom and she went?"

Dorrance felt the lady's gray eyes coldly fixed on his hot cheeks; but, with an assumption of utter indifference he was far from feeling, he replied:

"Chessom never went with her. It was I who took her off, and I'm sick enough of the bargain. You're welcome to her."

"You?"

Mrs. Arbuthnot fairly hissed the words in his ear. "After all, it was *you*?"

"Yes."

The three sat silent, glaring at each other in silent anger.

Then Dorrance burst forth, impetuously.

"There's no need to carry on this play longer. The truth is, I don't care for the girl, and I do love Gussie Palliser. You needn't argue, or rave, it will do no good."

"But think how you have lived all these years, Ellis, off her money—or a small portion of it, at least. Remember, a marriage is the only way to cover up this."

Mrs. Arbuthnot's voice was low and intense; but Dorrance was imperturbable.

"All you can say will not avail."

"Then you shall be exposed, sir."

Mr. Arbuthnot thundered the words; but Dorrance smiled calmly, turning to the lady.

"How is that? do gentlemen often deal so with step-sons? Mother, you will side with me at the last?"

"She dare not! I have borne with you long enough; I have been an ally in this conspiracy; and now, when your own selfishness is so apparent, I seem to see what a blind fool I've been to respect the secret Mrs. Dorrance told me when it was too late for me to help it. We have palmed off this trick of secrecy long enough. You shall be known as my wife's son; and Florence shall be declared the true heiress of—"

"Mr. Arbuthnot, you need not threaten me! Perhaps you forget you should not mention a certain fact, even before Ellis."

Dorrance opened his eyes in surprise.

"You have kept something back then?"

"More than you know of, perhaps; among which, is the fact that you need not follow your attention to Gussie Palliser. You will not marry her, rest assured."

Dorrance sneered.

"Pray, do you know the lovely young lady also?"

Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot exchanged glances, then the lady replied:

"Better than you do, Ellis."

A dark frown gathered on Dorrance's face.

"I am disgusted with so much mystery; mother, Mr. Arbuthnot, good-afternoon."

He departed silently, and while there was a gloomy frown on his forehead, a smile of self-gratulation was on his lip.

"At any rate, one band is broken. I will seek my bonnie Gussie this very afternoon. She must be mine; for I love her; and, besides, my last speculation was remarkably unlucky; Lakeview would not come amiss to me."

So, in his selfishness and wickedness, he hastened on to Lakeview.

At the entrance, he gave the man a familiar nod, and attempted to pass in, but was respectfully prevented.

"I have orders not to admit you, Mr. Dorrance. Miss Palliser bade me give you this if ever you came."

He handed Ellis a letter; the same he had sent by the carrier-dove to Chessom's Pride, so he knew she had received it.

On the last page was written, in Gussie's handwriting:

"Go to Isabel Lefevre and show her this letter. Never speak to, or of, me again. G. P."

He trembled in amazement; how did Gussie know of his acquaintance with Isabel?

It was ample food for reflection, as, chagrined and angered, he pursued his way, on foot, toward the Haunted House.

It lay directly past Chessom's Pride, by the main road; Florence Arbuthnot's residence being at one end of the village, furthest from Chessom's Pride: Lakeview at the end nearest, with Chessom's Pride lying about two-thirds of the distance between Gussie's residence and the Haunted House.

A feeling of bitter enmity toward Florence's accepted lover was in his heart as he gazed at the elegant mansion, its long and satin draped windows; its statues standing in the snow.

He wondered if Chessom had ever seen the note he had sent by the carrier-dove; wondered if he had not suspected who had detained the bird those days it was a prisoner in his own room.

He glanced up at the sunny side of the house, and caught sight of the gilded cage, reflecting the bright sunlight as the light wind swung it to and fro.

Lili was within, basking in the warm afternoon sunshine, her white plumage smooth and shining.

Had it been Gussie's hand—now lost to him forever—that had caressed it?

The thought sent an added balefulness to the already ugly glitter of his eyes.

"Gussie lost! Isabel estranged! and Florence unmanageable! By Jupiter, she shall be mine, if only to spite this haughty-headed Chessom, who ordered me from his house! Yes, and mine before the midnight bells shall ring, if not by fair means, by foul!"

He still stood, screened by a snow-laden arbor, glancing jealously at the house, that lay still and apparently uninhabited, in the early gathering shadows; for it was four o'clock or very near of a January day.

"If I could but once gain possession of that carrier-pigeon! I'd like to have the satisfaction of wringing its neck! no—I've a better deal by Jove, what a glorious revenge! I'll take it from its cage—the shutters are all closed, and I see no one on that side of the house—carry it to the Haunted House, and from there send a bulletin to my lord Chessom, stating Florence's condition, and my determination; after which I will adopt some feasible plan to leave this part of the country with my unwilling bride."

His black eyes gleamed with the anticipation of evil triumph as he quickly entered the snowy path that led to the library windows, against one of which the dove was hanging. He secured it without detection, thrust it in the breast of his overcoat, and amid the darkening sunset shadows, proceeded to the Haunted House.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PRETTY PLOT.

ELLIS DORRANCE had hardly left the residence of the Arbuthnots, when his step-father turned sharply to his wife.

"A pretty trick this noble son of yours has played us! And I've insulted Mr. Chessom, who I now see is a gentleman."

"You've changed your mind rather suddenly," remarked the lady, dryly. "So far as I am concerned, I never liked him, and never will. I only regret Ellis's stubbornness to marry Florence."

"What have I been telling you all these years? didn't I say he never would succeed? didn't I say it was a wicked shame to impose on her as long as we did? But she shall have her rights, and that, too, as soon as I can arrange it."

"One would think you *were* her father, to hear your disinterested kindness. I am wicked enough to confess I have always wanted her and my son to make a match. If I hadn't desired it, I certainly would not have schemed and plotted when she was a babe in her cradle; she and Gussie together."

"Gussie shall be told as well as Florence of the romantic drama in which she has all unconsciously been acting; and then, when Ellis finds he has lost all, perhaps he'll be less independent."

Mr. Arbuthnot was slowly pacing the room, and his wife toyed with the spoons on the table. "Ellis's spirit can never be broken; and as for the money he has used—Florence can well spare it. Oh, if he had only married her and secured the rest."

The impatient promenader did not answer immediately; then suddenly paused before his wife.

"Have you heard from Gussie's brother, lately?"

"Not for a six-month, at least. Why?"

"I desire him to be informed of the change that will take place; he knew it would occur some time, though not when. I will just telegraph to him to come to Beechcrest."

Then the restless walk went on, broken as before by a sudden stop.

"That rascal never told us where Florence was! By Jove! I wish I had tracked him. It's only ten minutes since he went, and I'll try. Get your shawl and hat and come with me."

To will was to do, in the Arbuthnot household, and in less than five minutes they were off, having been told by a boy who was skating on the little pond near by, which direction Mr. Dorrance had taken.

Absorbed by his thoughts, Dorrance had walked slowly; urged by far different motives, the Arbuthnots hastened on, catching a sight of him as he entered the grounds of Lakeview; they slackened their speed, and suffered him to depart.

As they passed the window, they saw the stony, vengeful face of Gussie peering after him. "Suppose you ask for an interview, while I keep on."

And, in compliance with her husband's command, Mrs. Arbuthnot went up to the elegant entrance. Gussie met her in the hall, with an affectionate kiss.

"Come right in; it is so cold. You saw Ellis go away?"

The black eyes flashed direfully as the lips framed the words.

Mrs. Arbuthnot caressed the small, shapely hand in a tender, half-hungry sort of way. "I saw him, dear. But I'd so much rather look at you! it has been so long since I saw you. This unnatural mode of living will soon be over, though, my darling, and I'll have you all the time then."

Gussie shrugged her shoulders prettily.

"I must admit I like all this elegance and luxury, only of course I have taught myself it is not mine. Suppose my handsome, stern brother knew who Lakeview belonged to, I think he'd open his black eyes wider."

Mrs. Arbuthnot's eyes were full of tenderest love as she gazed on Gussie's piquant, sparkling face.

"You've been a faithful daughter, my Gussie, and you shall be rewarded for serving us so well."

A little look of pain came into Gussie's face.

"But, mother, dear, I fear I have lost my heart in this daring game. I had learned to love Ellis better than I should have done. Often I forgot he was only a step-brother; and remember, I never saw him until we were both grown up; you kept me at school so closely."

"I know, dear, because I was so anxious he should marry Florence, and secure her wealth. I threw them together constantly, with that hope."

"Which was the very worst thing you could have done; besides, mother, did you not know that Ellis was already—"

A knock at the door, followed by Mr. Arbuthnot's entrance, interrupted Gussie's remark.

With a fond kiss and a caress, her father turned to his wife.

"He has stopped at Chessom's Pride for something, and I've got a man on the watch until he brings up somewhere. Gussie, you can give us a cup of tea? it will probably be the last we take at Lakeview, unless we are invited, which I hardly think. I telegraphed for your brother Will, Gussie, to come. He'll be in by the 8:30 down train."

"Will!" repeated she, joyfully. "I've not seen Will since I've been at Lakeview. I am so anxious to see him!"

"Then so soon as he comes, we are to go, all of us, to the place where Ellis has taken Florence, and explain the affair to her, and bring her home."

Mingled with Gussie's beauty that night, was a sadness; a weary sort of way she had with her that her mother and father could not understand. They forbore asking questions, however, and at early evening left her, quietly as they came, unseen as they always came, for their home.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A GRAND TABLEAU.

ELLIS DORRANCE was not in the best of humors when he arrived at the Haunted House.

Florence, from her window in the second story, saw him coming through the twilight darkness, his steps rapid and firm.

A fluttering of some tiny white object attracted her attention; she saw Dorrance smooth the little spot of white; then a head peered from beneath his hand.

With a scream of rapturous joy, Florence recognized Lili. For the first time since her departure from home, there came a genuine satisfactory ray of hope to her; for with Lili for her ally, she asked no stronger friend. She was too excited, too nervous to question how or why Dorrance had obtained possession of Lili; she was content to simply accept the fact he *had* possession.

Almost before Dorrance had entered the door, Florence had decided upon her course. To avoid being suspected by her captor, she resolved to go down to her meals as usual; carefully observe where the dove was placed, and at her earliest possible convenience, obtain possession, and send it home with a message she should prepare in the meantime.

She knew that it would take not a half-hour for Lili to reach Chessom's Pride, and for Arch to hurry back, if he were home.

So, wild with inward nervousness, she went down the stairs just in time to see Dorrance shut down the cover of a basket, and thrust it in the lower section of the large, old-fashioned secretary.

Dorrance glanced suddenly at her, but her gaze was into the blazing fire on the hearth.

"Bring in supper, Mary! Florence, I want a few moments' conversation with you."

She turned her head away with a gesture of disdain that did not improve his temper; and he laid his hand heavily on her shoulder.

She sprang from under it, her eyes flashing fire.

"Remove your hand, sir! and be careful not to repeat the offense!"

"That's all very fine, you know, but such acting is about 'played' with me. I am tired of this ceaseless, senseless shilly-shallying—"

"Which argues less for your grammar than it does for your refinement," she interpolated, keenly.

"Refinement notwithstanding. Florence Arbuthnot, I am going to put an end to all this. To-night you shall consent to be my wife, or a worse fate—"

She held up her hand in quiet, wrathful dignity.

"Do not speak such words in my presence. If your vile lips will speak them, say them to yourself. I will not listen."

She turned to go from the room, but he arrested her.

"Not yet! Just wait until I give Mary her orders for locking up."

He smiled sarcastically and stepped to the next room.

It was Florence's golden opportunity; quick as a flash of lightning she opened the basket, and took the tiny pigeon therefrom, securing it in her jacket.

Just as she had replaced the lid, and sunk upon a chair, covering her conscious features with her hands, Ellis returned.

"Pardon me for leaving you so long, but I had further to go for Mary than I thought. Allow me to escort you to your room-door."

She silently submitted, lest an attempt to resent his distasteful offer might lead to a discovery of her precious treasure.

At her door he bade her good-night."

"Pleasant dreams, Florence, if you insist on retiring. However, I'll venture to say you'll be down stairs before long. I am going to break another bottle of that Green Seal."

Florence saw he was already slightly under the influence of liquor, to which she attributed his willingness to permit her to seek her own room.

Not a moment was to be lost; trembling with fear lest Dorrance should discover the absence of Lili, she lighted her lamp, and having neither pencil or paper, pen or ink, she tore a piece of papering from the wall, and with the burnt end of the match scrawled to Arch the fact of her being a prisoner at a place near his house; with high towers; the house where he left a negress the morning before; signed her name, with a prayer for deliverance, and tied the paper to Lili's wing with a thread drawn from her dress.

The window was securely fastened, but she broke a pane in pieces; and Lili was off, beyond reach or recall!

Then, with true feminine nature, she sat down and cried.

It did her good, that hearty storm of nervous grief, that was a relief to her feelings, that, despite all her awful dangers, had never brought a tear to her eyes.

How long she sat there she did not know; it might have been five minutes or an hour, when a subdued knock was heard on her door, followed by Mary's voice.

"Oh, Miss Florence, ef dere ain't de awfulest goin's on down dem stairs! Massa Dorrance he half tipsy, and a-boss'in me roum, an' swearin' you shall kim down! Oh, Miss Florence, ef you on'y could cum afore he cums up! 'deed and 'deed you'd better! an ef he comes fur to go fur to tech you, I'll poker him, I will!"

"I will come down, Mary. I do not think he will abuse me."

So down she went, wondering if Arch would be home; if he would come in time to save her.

Dorrance was walking to and fro in furious anger.

"Where is that bird, you—"

He could find no word that suitably expressed what he wished to say, so he stopped abruptly. She met his lurid gaze as calmly as she could.

"What bird, Mr. Dorrance?"

"None of your evading the question! I ask where is that cursed bird?"

She was wondering what reply she could give consistent with truth, and yet not enrage him the more, when he burst forth again:

"But I've got you safe enough now, my beauty! and you shall pay for the trouble you've given me. Sit down there and I'll come sit beside you. I haven't had that pleasure in some time."

She seated herself on the edge of a chair nearest the next room.

Her face was pale as death, and her eyes furtively watching his every movement.

"That's not the chair I mean, you little coquette you! Come here on the lounge where I can put my arm around you and kiss you!"

"Will you wait one moment, Mr. Dorrance, while I go in this room for a glass of water?"

A deadly glitter in her eyes told she was not to be trifled with.

"To moisten those sweet lips? certainly, only excuse my want of gallantry in not waiting upon you."

She walked deliberately into the next room, and he heard her pour out a glass of water and swallow it; then she came out, paler than before.

"Now come! I'm impatient, you see!"

She stood perfectly still a moment, then spoke in a low, terrible voice:

"Ellis Dorrance! I shall never accede to your infamous demands. Beyond where I stand I shall not go one step."

"Then I can come to you! By Jove, I will, too!"

He sprang from the lounge, and advanced to meet her; his eyes glaring redly upon her, his breath hot and wine-tainted.

He extended his arms to enclasp her in his embrace; she drew back a pace and pointed a loaded pistol full in his face.

"It is your own that I saw lying there, which I obtained under pretense of wanting water, and before high Heaven I'll lay you dead at my feet if you lay a finger upon me!"

Her voice was high and ringing; and her hand never trembled with its dread engine of death.

Dorrance was taken aback; then by a sudden, swift motion of his hands, he caught her arms in his iron grasp; as cream issued from her lips.

A sudden, thunderous, prolonged knocking was heard at the door of the room; a powerful blow by more than one pair of hands, and Arch Chessom dashed in claspings Florence's fainting form just as Palmer pinioned Dorrance in his strong grip.

Mr. and Mrs. Arbuthnot, followed by Gussie, occupied the center of the room in solemn, painful silence. It was as if the shadow of Death had fallen upon them, so awfully still it was; with Florence lying pale and unconscious in her lover's arms, and Dorrance staring in speechless surprise at the unexpected intruders.

Then Mr. Arbuthnot broke the silence.

"Ellis, justice must be meted out, sooner or later, to every soul. It has come to you to-night. We have found you to be a villain, and even if you are my wife's son, I do not hesitate to unmask you. First, Gussie, what is your accusation?"

She bent on Dorrance a glance of mingled scorn and pity as she stepped forth.

"I would prefer that something be done for that poor girl first; bring water," she said, to Mary, who stood trembling in the doorway.

Then, when Florence had revived, and sat with her lover tenderly supporting her, Gussie produced a little note.

"It is from Isabel Lafevre, and declares on her oath she is Ellis Dorrance's lawful wife."

A gleam of rage shot from Dorrance's eyes, but he said nothing; he evidently knew he was baffled.

"And I," said Palmer, wish to inform this gentleman that I am Gussie's brother, Will; who, knowing the romantic game being played by the Arbuthnots, and desiring an equal share in the prize, devoted my life to the winning of Miss Florence, who, as heiress of Lakeview, would be a very acceptable wife, notwithstanding my worthy mother's desire that her first-born by her first husband should be the favored one."

Florence looked bewilderedly at them all; while Arch, to whom the story had been told on the way, as the parties met near Chessom's Pride, congratulated her lovingly.

"You see, darling," he explained, "Lakeview belonged to you always; your grandparents having died intestate; not knowing you were living as Florence Arbuthnot; that family having been hired to nurse you by your own mother when you were a baby in Europe."

"The Arbuthnots kept track of the family; and when they died, conceived the idea of passing their daughter Gussie as Miss Palliser, and keeping you at home as their daughter, thereby hoping Mr. Dorrance would marry you, and thus secure the property legally to them."

Glad tears sprung to Florence's bright eyes.

"And now your family will receive me?"

Arch flushed a little in chagrin, but he whispered, bravely:

"I am ashamed to confess it, that I think so."

"And, dear Florence, I have vacated Lakeview forever; the carriage is at the door, and you and Mr. Chessom are to go to your rightful home, and be married at once."

"I have done wrong, Florence," said Mrs. Arbuthnot, "and to atone I have given up the necessary papers to your future husband; Mr. Chessom will see to the proper settlements."

Dorrance still sat in stolid silence, while Will Arbuthnot, alias Palmer, stood behind him.

"Miss Palliser," said Palmer, "for I will be the first to call you by your true name, may I ever be forgiven? I am ashamed and repentant; I can say no more."

Florence, safe in Arch's arms, smiled brightly at him.

"You did me one favor, at least, Mr. Arbuthnot; I shall not forget that. Let us all be friends, and forget the past; all but—"

She hesitated, and flushed painfully as she looked at Dorrance.

He glanced angrily at her.

"All but me, I suppose? Well, this is all the friend I want—"

He snatched the pistol, laid it against his temple, fired, and fell dead among them; a bad man, whom no one regretted but his mother, to whom the blow was severe.

Why need we linger over this story longer?

Florence Palliser and Arch Chessom were married at Lakeview that very night; and on the morrow were received with open arms at Chessom's Pride!

Such is the way of the world!

THE END.

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